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Moral Conversion and Video Games

The Case of 'Spec Ops. The Line'

FRANK G. BOSMAN

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Moral Conversion and Video Games

Moral Conversion and Video Games is an in-depth exploration of *Spec Ops: The Line*, a critically acclaimed video game that subverts its genre by confronting players with the psychological and moral consequences of war.

Disguised as a standard third-person shooter, the game gradually reveals a dark, self-critical narrative in which the player's choices, though seemingly free, lead to horrifying outcomes, most notably a white phosphorus attack on civilians. Praised for its story, aesthetic, and philosophical depth, the game has been interpreted as a critique of glorified violence, American exceptionalism, and the illusion of meaningful choice in video games. Its use of cognitive and ludo-narrative dissonance forces players to reflect on their own complicity in virtual violence. The game's mirrored reference to Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*, recast as a burned mother and child, deepens its ethical and even theological resonance.

This insightful and in-depth study will interest researchers and students of video game studies, moral philosophy, and cultural theology.

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Dedication

Omnibus membris tribus Hylaeorum.

Mariëlle & Johanneke & Anika.

Für dies und das, Deo gratias.

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Introduction

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In January of 2024, the game *Spec Ops: The Line* was suddenly and unexpectedly delisted from several digital storefronts. Game publisher 2K stated that 'several partnership licenses related to the game are expiring' as the main reason for retracting their product from the market. Game magazine *Polygon* speculated that the inclusion of music by Alice in Chains, Deep Purple, and Jimi Hendrix in the game was at the heart of the license disagreements.[1] Cory David, the game's lead designer, responded, annoyed, on X, writing: 'Makes no sense – especially because the themes portrayed in @SpecOpsTheLine are more relevant now than ever.'[2]

Spec Ops: The Line was developed by Yager Development and released in 2012 for PlayStation 3, Windows, Xbox 360, OS X, and Linux. The themes it portrays and which are 'more relevant than ever' include an 'in-depth critique of player choice, violence in games and the climate of the games industry as a whole at the time of release.'[3] In 2022, *Forbes* published an article under the title 'The Most Underrated, Overlooked Third-Person Shooter Turns 10 Today.'[4] It celebrated the 10th anniversary of the release of the game *Spec Ops: The Line*. And it praised the game as follows:

> Arriving with little-to-no fanfare (…), *Spec Ops: The Line* – the last-ever game in an otherwise unremarkable ten-strong franchise of tactical shooters – not only revolutionized its series, but raised the bar for narrative storytelling to such a degree that it continues to set a standard one decade after its release. (…) You'll walk away feeling simultaneously unfulfilled and entirely blown away by its storytelling.

The game has been praised by fans and critics for its 'thoughtful aesthetic and intelligent enemy encounters,' 'cracking story set in an original and atmospheric environment,' and its raising of 'philosophical questions,' putting the player 'outside of [their] comfort zone.'[5] Others, like Rick Lane from *NME*, argued that the game is a 'terrifying premonition of climate change.'[6] Scholars have pointed to the game's criticism of the glorification of violence

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and uncritical patriotism, the game's subversion of military shooter conventions, the ethical quandaries including unwinnable scenarios, the psychological cost of war, and the game's use of cognitive and ludo-narrative dissonance to encourage players to contemplate the consequences of and the responsibilities regarding war and violence.[7] The United Arab Emirates, on the other hand, banned the game altogether because of its depiction of Dubai in ruins.[8]

Individual players have reported unease with the game. Game journalist Curtis Silver of *Wired* described the game as imbuing 'severe psychological trauma to the main character.'[9] He summarized his experience with the game as: 'Unlike other shooters, *Spec Ops: The Line* offers players a choice, how far into darkness they are willing to go to complete the mission.'[10] On Reddit, user Rocketman0739 reported that he felt 'dirty' after finishing the game.[11] Similarly, user Zerms4 wrote that the game made him feel 'horrible.'[12] Tobi Smethurst – in his analysis of the game – concludes that *Spec Ops: The Line* shows that games

> do not have to be fun in order to be critically (if not commercially) successful. Ultimately, *Spec Ops: The Line* exemplifies that by requiring the player's constant, active input in order to function, computer games have the potential to involve the player, and to invoke and explore perpetration and guilt, in ways that more traditional media such as books and films cannot.[13]

Spec Ops: The Line starts as a dime a dozen third-person action shooter-cum-military simulator like the game industry has created and distributed by the hundreds.[14] 'Realistic' military shooter series like *Battlefield* (2002–2021), *Call of Duty* (2003–2023), *Crysis* (2007–2021), *Medal of Honor* (1999–2020), and *Sniper Elite* (2005–2022) are immensely popular, but have also been extensively criticized by scholars for numerous reasons: (1) the complex symbiosis between the military and entertainment industries; (2) the creation of a romanticized version of real-life combat with all its devastating consequences for soldiers and civilians alike; (3) the depiction of the perceived military and political dominance of the West over the rest of the world including a moral justification for maintaining and defending this perceived status quo; and (4) the matter-of-fact dichotomy between 'good' American or other Western soldiers and self-explanatory *and* stereotypical evil entities like 'the Arabs' or 'the Russians.'

A Question of Morality

Initially, *Spec Ops: The Line* seems to tread the familiar, worn-out paths of the military shooter. A three-man strong elite Delta Force team, led by Captain Martin Walker, the game's protagonist, is sent to present-day and

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sandstorm-torn Dubai to investigate the whereabouts of the 'Damned' 33rd Infantry Battalion. The 33rd Battalion went in to help evacuate the civilian population, but all radio contact ceased without explanation. What starts as a run-of-the-mill, hero-focused narrative turns darker with every instance of the game's campaign. The Delta team has to deal with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the local militia, and the soldiers of the 33rd Battalion – who have apparently gone rogue and are fighting among themselves. The war and the conflicts are everything but glorious, and Walker's team slowly descends into a physical and mental hell of their own unwanted making.

Eventually, Walker and his team arrive at an encampment of the 33rd Battalion known as 'The Gate.' Walker is convinced that the 33rd Battalion has gone rogue and that the Battalion is now rounding up the citizens of Dubai to execute them, and he sets out to save them. When the Delta team is met with heavy resistance from the 33rd Battalion's soldiers, Walker sees no alternative other than to employ white phosphorus grenades against their fellow American adversaries. White phosphorus is a chemical substance that instantly ignites when it comes into contact with oxygen. It is used for illuminating the battlefield and for producing thick smoke screens. It has devastating consequences when it comes into contact with human beings, causing severe burns, blindness, and lung failure. The use of white phosphorus is controversial but not illegal under U.S. law, with the only specific exception being its use explicitly against civilians.[15] The game communicates this blatantly in three messages that appear semi-randomly during loading sequences (#046, #047, and #094) throughout the game:

> White phosphorus is a common allotrope used in many types of munitions. It can set fire to cloth, fuel, ammunition, and flesh. Though controversial, the use of white phosphorus against personnel is not prohibited. Survivors of white phosphorus often suffer severe damage to the kidneys and liver, as well as the cardiovascular and nervous systems.

Once the soldiers of the 33rd Battalion have been defeated, Walker and his team walk through a body-littered battlefield, with smoking and smoldering bodies scattered around. Some victims can utter some final words: 'why' and 'we were helping.' The devastating truth dawns on Walker and his team when they stumble upon the burned bodies of 47 women, men, and children – civilians of the 33rd Battalion had actually been trying to rescue from precisely Delta Force's violence. Another Loading Screen comments dryly: 'White phosphorus is a common allotrope used in your slaughter at The Gate. It can set fire to soldiers and the innocent civilians they are trying to help' (Loading Screen #096).

During a cut scene in which the other two Delta operatives are blaming themselves and each other for the horror they have caused, Walker's eyes

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are fixated on a mother and child. Both have been horribly burned by the phosphorus attack. One eye of the mother is missing and the other is white with blindness. Her hair has been burned away halfway around her head. On her lap a child, probably hers, is sitting in a similar state of disfigurement. The mother is holding her right hand around the child as if to protect it, while she shields the child's eyes with her other hand, probably to prevent the child from having to witness the atrocities surrounding them. Walker blames the 33rd Battalion for making them do such horrific and barbaric things. And the violence continues. The game keeps taunting the player in multiple loading screens, among which is the sarcastic question: 'Do you feel like a hero yet?' (loading screen #102).

Spec Ops: The Line would have made a very intriguing film if it had not already been based on the 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*, which in turn was based on Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness*. (The game refers to the novella with the name of the 33rd Battalion's commanding officer, John Konrad.[16]) But in contrast to a film or a novella, *Spec Ops: The Line* is a video game, with far-reaching consequences for its message and impact. In video games, by necessity, the gamer is very much *involved in* the action taking place. This is in contrast to other media – like films and novels – in which the viewer or reader is merely *witnessing* what the characters are experiencing (possibly connecting and/or identifying cognitively and/or emotionally with one or more of them); they cannot influence what is happening in the film's or the novel's narrative since everything has been pre-decided by the medium's author. In the case of a video game, the story is not only told *to* the player (just like any other story in all mediums) but also *about* the player and *by* the player. The player has agency and, through this, responsibility for what is happening in the game and for the decisions the player's avatar is making in-game, through which the unfolding and/or outcome of the game's narrative can change drastically. A player does not just witness a game's story: he co-creates it (together with the game's author) by playing it, that is, interacting with it.[17]

In almost all games, this agency is ludic in nature: the players have the opportunity to choose – within pre-set limits – how they want to proceed through the game. The amount of ludic freedom depends on the genre: corridor shooters like *Half-Life 2* (Valve, 2004) or *Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy* (Eidos-Montréal, 2021) feature limited freedom, while open sandbox games like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011) or *Far Cry 5* (Ubisoft Montréal, 2018) offer much more player choice. In some games, the player is also given narrative agency with the help of branching storylines and/or morality systems that change the unfolding of the game and the outcome of the game based on the choices the player has made. Examples include the original *Mass Effect* series (BioWare, 2007, 2010, 2012) and the first two *Dishonored* installments (Arkane Studios, 2012, 2016).[18]

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Spec Ops: The Line turns this whole idea upside down. The ludic freedom the game offers its players is relatively limited due to the fact that the player is guided from one 'arena' to the next. Narratively, however, the game seems to offer its players much more freedom, especially in the form of six choices, all morally supercharged, one of them being how to deal with the situation described above regarding the phosphorus grenades. At first glance, the game allows the player other options to deal with the situation. Walker has a discussion with his fellow Delta Force members John Lugo and Adams precisely on the subject of choice:

> *Lugo*: You're fuckin' kidding, right? That's white phosphorus.
> *Walker*: Yeah, I know what it is.
> *Lugo*: You've seen what this shit does! You know we can't use it.
> *Adams*: We might not have a choice, Lugo.
> *Lugo*: There's always a choice.
> *Walker*: No, there's really not. (…) Okay. Prepare to fire.
> *Lugo*: That an order?
> *Walker*: Yeah, it is.

However, the choice the game offers to the player is ultimately a fake one. The player can choose to engage the enemy in a conventional, head-on way, which leads to the unavoidable death of Walker and his team due to being outnumbered and eventually left without ammunition, or he can use the laptop by which the mortar is operated, firing the phosphorus bombs at the enemies with the earlier described horrible consequences. It is as Walker says to Lugo: 'there's really not [a choice].' The game does this a lot: suggesting moral agency to the player of the game, only to snatch it away when scrutinized. And through this, the game puts tremendous and continuously increasing pressure on the connection between Walker, the player's in-game avatar, and the player itself. The only way out of this moral conundrum appears to be to stop playing, a suggestion the game seems to force on its players throughout the campaign: a rather paradoxical property for a game (to say the least). It almost appears as if the game wants its players to contemplate their in-game actions ethically, even urging them to engage in a kind of moral conversion.

Alfredo Mac Laughlin defines 'conversion' as a change in a person's 'internal field of convictions, beliefs, attitudes and emotions (…) affect[ing] the convert's behavior, demeanor and actions.'[19] The theologian and philosopher Bernard Lonergan, very helpfully for our investigation of *Spec Ops: The Line*, differentiates between intellectual, moral, and religious forms of conversion.[20] Intellectual conversion is connected to epistemology, to understanding the world in a radically different way; moral conversion is connected to a radical change in the 'criterion of one's decisions and choices from satisfaction to values;'[21] while religious conversion denotes a 'radical shift in a person's

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metaphysical, epistemological, practical and affective relation to the world.'[22] In the case of *Spec Ops: The Line*, it seems obvious to utilize the category of moral conversion, because that is precisely what the game appears to be exercising over its players: the distortion of the established rules of the standard war simulator *and* of the traditional morality systems as they are commonly found in video game culture steers its players away from gaming-as-fun (or ludo-strategical behavior) to an extreme form of gaming-as-catharsis (or narrative-ethical behavior).

However, the category of religious conversion is not alien to *Spec Ops: The Line*, even though it is reasonably well hidden while paradoxically in plain sight, and it is not as radical as Lonergan seems to suggest it is. At the end of the game – when Walker is finally confronted with and is confronting himself with what he has become, as is the player by this point – a mirrored version of Raphael's famous painting 'The Sistine Madonna' is shown.[23] Where the original painting shows a traditional rendering of Mother Mary and her infant Jesus, the in-game version features a mouthless Mary-and-Child, painted against war-torn scenery similar to what the player has just experienced and is (also) responsible for creating. Even more forcefully, the mirrored *Madonna* resembles the image of the burned mother and child found by Walker after he personally ordered the use of phosphorus on the 33rd Battalion. The combination of the two Madonnas and the contextualization within war-torn Dubai invokes the Biblical tradition (Matthew 2:16–18) of the Bethlehem infanticide (also known as The Massacre of the Innocents), thus identifying Jesus and his mother with the innocent victims of war and violence.[24]

What to Expect from This Book?

The central subject of this monograph is to – with the help of an in-depth analysis of *Spec Ops: The Line* – discuss video games and their unique communicative properties in their capacity to provoke moral conversion in their players. Of course, throughout this book, I will make numerous comparisons to other video games with comparable qualities. However, I will argue that *Spec Ops: The Line* excels in this respect, since all its narrative and ludic properties are aimed at precisely this specific goal. To argue for all of this, I will take two important steps related to the two parts of this book.

The first part of this monograph is dedicated to preliminary discussions concerning the study of video games, how to define them, and how to analyze their unique communicative properties (Chapter 1); the idea of moral conversion and its interrelated intellectual and religious counterparts (Chapter 2); the notion of 'ethical gameplay' including discussions on in-game morality systems and the connected notion of 'wicked problems' to distinguish various levels of moral problems in video games (Chapter 3); and the somewhat paradoxical concept of anti-war video games (Chapter 4). In the first chapter,

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I will extensively argue that video games, *as texts*, feature both text-internal and text-external authors (developers) and readers (players). The differences between the text-internal and text-external communication entities are paramount to the inner workings of the game and its appeal to its players.

The second part of this monograph focuses on the analysis of the game *Spec Ops: The Line* itself. First, I will summarize the narrative details of the game story including the (pseudo) moral choices and the four different endings the game can have depending on the player's choices (Chapter 5). Next, I will introduce and discuss the various ways the game communicates its message to its players, that is, through the intentional use of ludo-narrative dissonance, the use of fourth wall-breaking dialogues, and the tension the game places on the (usually self-explanatory) entanglement and identification between the player's avatar and the player itself (Chapter 6).

The next chapter is dedicated to the various criticisms the game voices, both implicitly and explicitly (Chapter 7): the gratuity of violence in first-person shooters-cum-war simulators; the binary and therefore unrealistic nature of in-game morality systems including the possibility of exploiting the save-load system of the game to select the most agreeable outcome based on short-term consequences; the use of 'Arabs' as self-explanatory villains in video games in general; and American (military) imperialism and its religion-inspired exceptionalism.

The final chapter of this monograph focuses on the inclusion of a mirrored version of Raphael's famous painting *The Sistine Madonna* resembling the image of the burned mother-and-child found by Walker after he personally ordered the use of phosphorus on the 33rd Battalion (Chapter 8). This chapter will venture into the intertextual relationships between the in-game painting and the historical painting by Raphael, as well as its (liberation) theological significance within the game's narrative.

In the conclusion, I will argue when and how a game like *Spec Ops: The Line* motivates its players to engage in moral conversion, intellectually, morally, and religiously. This makes the game a catalyst for such a conversion for its players, both on the level of the text-*internal* player and on that of the text-*external* player, arguing that the greater freedom of the latter makes it possible to end the cycle of (digital) violence by stopping the playing of the game.

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Part I

Preliminaries

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1 Video Games
What They Are

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In 2019, a YouTuber with the handle 'Ahoy' published a video essay on the video game *Pong* (Atari, 1972), which many believe to be the first genuine video game.[1] But Ahoy, the alias of Stuart Brown, begs to differ, arguing that some software preceding Atari's 1972 product could be considered to be games.[2] Brown describes some of this software in greater detail. *Computer Space* (1971), for example, predates *Pong* by a full year, being the first *commercial* arcade video game. The game was developed by Syzygy, which would later be rebranded as Atari, and produced by Nutting Associates, featuring a space combat theme where players controlled a rocket ship battling enemy unidentified flying objects (UFOs). Nine years earlier, *Spacewar!* (1962) was created by Steve Russell, Martin Graetz, Wayne Wiitanen, and others for the DEC PDP-1 minicomputer at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The game was not intended for commercial release; it was purely an academic exercise. The game involves two spaceships, known as 'the needle' and 'the wedge,' locked in a dogfight while navigating the gravitational pull of a central star. Both ships are controlled by human players.

Tennis for Two was designed even earlier, in 1958, by William Higinbotham on the Donner Model 30 analog computer at the Brookhaven National Laboratory (Long Island, New York, USA). The game was displayed on an oscilloscope and played using custom aluminum controllers. The visuals depicted a tennis court from a side view. Players used a knob on the controller to adjust the angle of their shots and pressed a button to hit the ball over the net. The year 1952 had three earlier contenders for the title of 'first video game ever': *Oxo* designed by A.S. Douglas for the EDSAC at the University of Cambridge (a kind of tic-tac-toe operated by a rotary dial), *Draughts*, developed by C.S. Strachey on the Ferranti Mark 1 at the Victoria University of Manchester (UK), and *Sheep and Gates*, by S. Gill on the EDSAC at the University of Cambridge. Even earlier were *Nimrod* (1951), designed by John Makepeace Bennett and Raymond Stuart-Williams, dedicated to playing a game called 'Nim,' and another tic-tac-toe game, called *Bertie the Brain*, designed by Josef Kates in 1950. Pushing the limits, one

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could even argue that the CRT Amusement Device, designed by Thomas T. Goldsmith Jr. and Estle Ray Mann in 1947, was the very first video game. The device simulates an artillery shell's arc toward targets displayed on a cathode-ray tube (CRT) screen. The player controls the trajectory of the CRT beam spot by adjusting knobs, aiming to hit plastic targets placed over the screen. Unfortunately, the CRT-AD was never built.

What is the first genuine video game?[3] This is a difficult question to answer, since it does not go without saying that these very early software and hardware combinations such as *Tennis for Two* or *Oxo*, let alone an unrealized patent like CRT Amusement Device, can be categorized as video games. Behind the question of whether *Pong* is the first video game or not, a deeper one lurks: what constitutes a video game in the first place? In his video essay, Stuart Brown argues that a product should have five characteristics in order to qualify as such: it should (1) exist in a practical implementation, (2) generate some kind of video signal, (3) have interaction that alters this signal, (4) be principally intended for entertainment, and (5) be playable solely through the video display(s). Based on this definition, Brown accepts *Oxo* and *Draughts* as the first video games, disqualifying earlier contenders.

Making a practical definition of video games is a difficult thing to do. It should incorporate different genres as far and wide apart as *Thomas Was Alone* (Mike Bithell, 2012) and *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2018), respectively a single-player, two-dimensional puzzle game with existential overtones using abstract but anthropomorphized abstract shapes (based on the paintings of the Dutch expressionist Piet Mondrian), and a free-to-play massive multiplayer online battle royale game that spawned a genre of its own.[4] Moreover, any definition should also include games from the first decades of the medium, like the two-dimensional *Galaxian* (Namco, 1979) and *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo, 1981) with their simplistic narratives and crude graphics, up to the AAA publications of our modern era, like the action role-playing games *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerilla Games, 2017) and *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware, 2022) with their complex, multilevel, branching storytelling, state-of-the-art aesthetic realism, and contrived and intertwined gameplay loops.

As video games as a genre have developed, the definitions have followed suit. Espen Aarseth emphasized video games as cybernetic systems driven by player interaction, focusing on their mechanical and rule-based nature.[5] Salen Tekinbaş and Eric Zimmerman added a layer of artificial conflict, highlighting the importance of competition or challenge.[6] Jesper Juul integrated the player's emotional investment into this rule-based framework, emphasizing the negotiable consequences of gaming and the role of player effort in influencing outcomes.[7] Gordon Calleja focused on the player's involvement on various levels, ranging from kinesthetic, spatial, and narrative to affective and ludic ones.[8] The definitions progressed from a focus on rules and structure to more complex ideas about player engagement, experience, and meaning, demonstrating a shift from games as mechanical systems to immersive and

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interactive domains where the player's role becomes more central in shaping the experience.

Digitally Mediated Ludo-Narrative Texts

In my earlier 2019 work *Gaming and the Divine*, I defined video games as 'digital, interactive, playable, narrative texts.'[9] In our 2022 work *Gaming as Art*, Archibald van Wieringen and I published a more concise and streamlined definition: video games are digitally mediated ludo-narrative texts.[10] This definition gives video games four characteristics: they are (1) texts, (2) ludic, (3) narrative in nature, and (4) interacted with by means of a digital medium. I will elaborate shortly on these four.

Text

The concept of 'text' has undergone significant development through the contributions of several key philosophers, predominantly of French origin. Traditionally, a 'text' is an object (paper, tablet, papyrus, or any other material capable of being inscribed or written upon) and/or the signs and symbols written or inscribed on it, and/or the message conveyed by the object, signs, and symbols. But several philosophers have argued that the notion of 'text' and its interconnectedness is much broader than traditional definitions convey: Roland Barthes (*Le mort de l'auteur*, 1967), Jacques Derrida (*De la grammatologie*, 1967), Umberto Eco (*Opera aperta*, 1962), Julia Kristeva (*La révolution du language poétique*, 1974), Paul Ricoeur (*Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, 1976), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (*Mille Plateaux*, 1980), and Mikhail Bakhtin (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 1981) to name a few.

They all argue, in one way or the other, three things: (1) texts are principally multi-interpretable and intrinsically connected to one another, (2) there is no final instance to determine the objective meaning of any given text (even not the text's author or authors), and (3) everything that can be considered as communicating meaning is thought of as a 'text,' including novels, paintings, sculptures, films, (interactive) theater, liturgy, and – very important in this regard – video games.[11] Even though the great philosophers did not explicitly include video games as a possible textual medium, they nevertheless qualify as texts, since they most definitely communicate meaning. However, they do so in a very specific manner, to which I will return later in this chapter.

Ludus *and* Narratio

Next, the reason I define video games as a ludic-narrative unity is rooted in the ludology-vs-narratology debate of the game studies of the early 2000s. It

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revolves around the identification of video games as exclusively or predominantly either *ludus* ('play' or 'game') or as *narratio* ('story' or 'narrative').[12] Ludologists like Markku Eskelinen, Jesper Juul, and Gonzalo Frasca argued that games are all about interactivity, rules, competition, and feedback mechanisms, while narratologists like Janet Murray and Marie-Laure Ryan insisted that games are essentially interactive stories.[13] By the end of the decade, the debate seemed to have died out when ludologists and narratologists unanimously claimed that the whole matter was some sort of misunderstanding: of course, video games were both *ludus* and *narratio*.[14] Nevertheless, the distinction – even if outdated by now – is useful for our discussion about the nature of video games.

Of course, there are categories of games that are massively or even seemingly exclusively either ludic or narrative in nature, strongly negating, or at least suppressing the other. On the ludic side of gaming, we find sports simulations like the *FIFA* football series (EA, 1997–2022) and several Chess or Go games, but also abstract puzzle games like the hundreds of iterations of *Tetris* (Alexey Pajitnov, 1985).[15] One could argue that these kinds of games are pure play, leaving no room for a story to be told. However, as Janet Murray and Marie-Laure Ryan have argued, it is far from impossible to nevertheless extract a meaningful story. Murray, for example, interprets *Tetris* as an enactment of laborers in a capitalist society (very apt for a game developed in the communist USSR).[16] And many live commentaries of offline sports events by enthusiastic journalists show that even baseball or football games can turn into epic battles between arch-enemies, as Ryan has argued substantially.[17]

On the other hand, we have video games that are mainly narrative in nature, forsaking much of the traditional ludic elements associated with the medium of video games. The genre of the walking simulators fits nicely into this category with games like *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012), *The Beginner's Guide* (Everything Unlimited, 2015), and *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016), which allow players to roam through the game world virtually unchallenged by mortally dangerous events needing quick reflexes, allowing them to experience the deeper story the game provides.[18] Nevertheless, these games are not devoid of ludic elements, since the players have to interact with the game world in order to proceed through the game and its story.

Ludo-Narrative Dissonance

One more word on the ludic and narrative nature of video games and the entanglement between these elements. Both elements can work in synchronicity with one another – the obvious preferred state of things – but they can also not do so, leading to what Clint Hocking calls the 'ludo-narrative

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dissonance.'[19] For example, the story of the game *BioShock* (2K, 2007) critiques the philosophy of Ayn Rand's Objectivism and questions the morality of unchecked free will and power. And while the story seems to question the ethics of power, the gameplay rewards the player for exerting violent control and power over others, creating a thematic conflict.[20]

The 2013 *Tomb Raider* reboot (Crystal Dynamics) depicts Lara Croft as a vulnerable and inexperienced young woman who is forced into dangerous survival situations. And while the game's story emphasizes her emotional struggle and reluctance to engage in violence, the gameplay quickly turns Lara into a highly efficient killer, as the player has to fight through waves of enemies.[21] And even though MachineGames tried very hard to incorporate the Jews as the primary victims of the Nazi regime in their 2014 *Wolfenstein* reboot, *The New Order*, their depiction of an ancient, powerful, technologically hyper-advanced, but underground Jewish organization bordered on antisemitism.[22] Other examples include the *Uncharted* series (Naughty Dog, 2007–2022), *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar Games, 2013), and *Far Cry 5* (Ubisoft, 2018).[23] The game *Spec Ops: The Line* also features a number of ludo-narrative dissonances, however – as I will argue later in this monograph – not unintentionally, but as an intended part of its communication and narrative.

Digitally Mediated

Last but not least, I regard video games as ludo-narrative texts that are digitally mediated, primarily to distinguish them from analog ludo-narrative texts, that is, traditional tabletop games like *Monopoly*, *Dungeons and Dragons*, or *Magic: The Gathering*. 'Digitally mediated' refers to interactions, processes, or experiences that are facilitated or enabled by digital technologies. In other words, when something is 'digitally mediated,' it means that digital tools, platforms, or systems serve as the medium through which communication, activity, or engagement occurs.

Avatar-Player Entanglement

Due to their characteristic of being both a ludic and narrative (digitally mediated) text, video games have a unique communication property: the entanglement between the video game's character-avatar and its text-internal reader (see Figure 1.1).

According to the 'communication-oriented' hermeneutics, based on the literary theories mentioned above in the context of the notion of 'text,' and developed by my colleague Van Wieringen and me regarding the analysis of various texts, including video games, all texts have three layers:[24]

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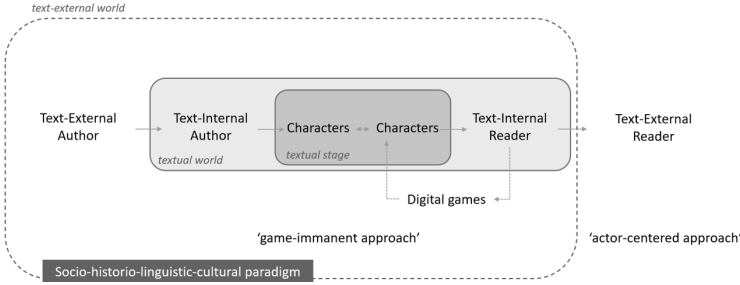

Figure 1.1 The entanglement between the video game's character-avatar and its text-internal reader according to the Communication-Oriented Method of Text Analysis.

- the text-external world, where the text-external author(s) and reader(s), both of flesh and blood, exist communicating with one another through the textual medium; in the case of video games, these are the game's developers and the game's actual players;
- the textual world, or text-internal world, where the text-internal author and text-internal reader reside; these are not persons of flesh and blood, but theoretical entities that exist only in the (video game) text;
- the textual stage, on which the game's characters and props are placed by the text-internal author to interact with one another.

This division resembles an older one, introduced by Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll, and Jan Wysocki in 2014. In video game studies, they distinguished between two approaches to the analysis of video games: the actor-centered approach and the game-immanent approach.[25] The latter focuses on the game itself (cf. the textual world), while the former does the same with the text-external readers of a game.

The three divisions are applicable to all texts, regardless of medium or genre. But since all texts have their medium-specific communication properties, video games feature – quite uniquely among the various mediums – an entanglement between the game's text-internal player (in the textual world) and its in-game avatar (character on the textual stage). In the context of video games, an avatar refers to the character or graphical representation that the player controls or identifies with within the game world. It acts as the player's presence in the digital environment, allowing the player to interact with the game's systems, objects, and other characters. Avatars can take various forms, including human, animal, or abstract shapes, depending on the game's design. Because of the communication entanglement, this means three things simultaneously:

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- the game is told *to* the text-internal player by the text-internal author (as is the case in all texts);
- the game is told *about* the text-internal player, in as far as it is entangled with its avatar-character, by the text-internal author;
- the game is told *by* the text-internal player in as far as it is entangled with its avatar-character and in as far as it is allowed to do so by the text-internal author of the game.

Some games try to manipulate the unique communication properties of the video game medium, a genre known as 'meta games' or 'self-aware games.' Examples include: *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café, 2013), *The Beginner's Guide* (Everything Unlimited, 2015), *Undertale* (Toby Fox, 2015), and *Nier: Automata* (PlatinumGames, 2017). *Spec Ops: The Line* is also one of those games that bent the rules of traditional video game communication, as we will see in the second part of this monograph. There are some important differences between text-internal and text-external players, the latter having a lot more freedom than the former. Text-external players of flesh and blood can:

- go to texts outside the game's text to check game manuals or player guides online;
- watch YouTube clips with walkthroughs or visit online forums with fellow players sharing tips and tricks;
- can add code to the game's original software in the form of mods (modification software);
- can choose – if allowed – to play the game in a non-linear manner, for example, in the case of chapter selection (usually only available after the completion of the chapter in question by regular-sequential playing);
- can choose to quit the game at any moment, either to return later and continue, or to leave the game unfinished forever;
- can pass (but not necessarily) a (moral) judgment on the game he or she is playing.

On the other hand, the text-internal player:

- has to stay within the boundaries of the game's textual world;
- cannot add any code to the software (excepting cheat codes if they are programmed into the game);
- cannot play the game any other way than it was intended to be played by the text-internal author;
- cannot choose to leave the game at any moment;
- cannot pass any judgment on the game it is playing.

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Glitches are an interesting phenomenon in this context. From a text-external perspective, a glitch refers to an unintended or unexpected error or malfunction within the game's software that causes it to behave in ways that the developers did not plan. Glitches can affect various aspects of gameplay, from visual bugs and physics problems to broken mechanics or unexpected outcomes. However, from a text-internal perspective, the glitch is part of the game's textual world and therefore not 'unintended' or an 'error.'[26]

To summarize, in this monograph, we consider video games, including *Spec Ops: The Line*, as digitally mediated ludo-narrative texts, possessing the unique communication property of an entanglement between the text-internal player and its in-game avatar-character.

Notes

1 Stuart Brown, 'The First Video Game,' *YouTube*, October 4, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHQ4WCU1WQc [visited September 24, 2024].
2 See also: David Ahl, 'Mainframe Games and Simulation,' in: Mark Wolf (ed.), *The Video Game Explosion. A History from Pong to PlayStation and Beyond*, Westport: Greenwood Press (2008), 31–35; Mark Wolf, 'Arcade Games of the 1970s,' in: Mark Wolf (ed.), *The Video Game Explosion. A History from Pong to PlayStation and Beyond*, Westport: Greenwood Press (2008), 35–44; Steven Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*. *From Pong to Pokémon and Beyond. The Story Behind the Graze that Touched Our Lives and Changed the World*, New York: Three Rivers Press (2001), 1–48; and Dusten Hansen, *Game On! Video Game History*. *From Pong and Pac-Man to Mario, Minecraft, and More*, New York: First Square Fish (2019).
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10 Bosman and Van Wieringen, *Games As Art*, 9.

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12 Bosman and Van Wieringen, *Games as Art*, 7–9.
13 Markku Eskelinen, 'The Gaming Situation,' *Game Studies* 2/1 (2001); Jesper Juul, 'Games Telling Stories? A Brief Note on Games and Narratives,' *Game Studies* 1/1 (2001); Gonzalo Frasca, 'Ludology Meets Narratology. Similitude and Differences between (Video) Games and Narrative,' *Ludology*, http://www.ludology.org/articles/ludology.htm [visited October 8, 2028]; Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck. The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Cambridge: MIT Press (1997); and Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (2006).
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17 Ryan, *Avatars*, 75–93.
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2 Moral Conversion

Being Serious about Games

***

The term *moral conversion* can easily evoke (extreme) discomfort in both secular and religious contexts due to its associations with coercive practices throughout history up until the present day. While moral conversion might suggest a process of personal ethical transformation, the concept is burdened with complex connotations. Historically, it has been tied to religious evangelization and mission efforts, particularly during the era of European colonial expansion. During this period, forced conversion became a tool for justifying both cultural and political domination. Various Christian missionaries, often working alongside colonial authorities, presented conversion to Christianity as a moral imperative, framing indigenous spiritual traditions as morally inferior. In reality, these conversion efforts were often marked by coercion, violence, and the suppression of indigenous identities and worldviews.[1] Scholars have pointed out that these historical practices were not just religious, but deeply intertwined with imperialist agendas.[2] Conversion was used as a way to assimilate indigenous populations into Western norms and values, blurring the line between religious and moral transformation and cultural domination. This has left a legacy where *moral conversion* is viewed by many as an instrument of oppression rather than of personal growth.

While many missionaries historically collaborated with colonial authorities, others played significant roles in advocating for the oppressed and marginalized. Various missionaries worked to alleviate the suffering of the poor and the sick, particularly in colonized regions.[3] Liberation theologians and missionaries inspired by this theology actively resisted colonial oppression and injustice. This movement, which emerged in Latin America in the 20th century, emphasized the Christian duty to advocate for the poor and to challenge systemic injustices. These missionaries stood against colonial exploitation, advocating for the rights of indigenous peoples.[4]

In contemporary contexts, moral conversion continues to be fraught with controversy, particularly in relation to practices like conversion therapy.[5]

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This practice, often promoted by certain Christian groups, aims to change an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity.[6] Despite being widely condemned by medical and psychological associations for its harmful and unethical nature, conversion therapy remains a painful reality for many. It evokes associations with the imposition of a particular moral framework onto others, further entrenching the perception that *moral conversion* involves coercion rather than a freely chosen ethical transformation.

Recognizing these associations is essential before re-engaging with the concept of moral conversion. In this chapter, I aim to explore moral conversion as a process of genuine ethical transformation grounded in personal agency, rather than coercion. By reclaiming the term, I hope to shift the focus away from imposed change and toward an understanding of conversion that emphasizes individual choice, moral growth, and the possibility of ethical renewal.

Lonergan's Triple Conversion

A number of philosophers and theologians have occupied themselves with the topic of (moral) conversion, among whom Thomas Aquinas, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Augustine of Hippo, Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard, and John Henry Newman are the most prominent.[7] However, as already indicated (see the Introduction), I will use the theories of the Canadian Jesuit theologian and philosopher Bernard Lonergan to establish a concept of moral conversion to work with – both in the context of video games, in general, and in relation to *Spec Ops: The Line* specifically.[8] Lonergan describes three types of conversion – intellectual, moral, and religious – which are very much interconnected but do not overlap completely.[9]

To explain what conversion – any of the three – actually is, Lonergan starts with the distinction between a horizontal and a vertical exercise of one's freedom as suggested by the French Jesuit Joseph de Finance de Clairbois (1904–2000) in his 1967 book *Éthique générale*. 'Horizontal freedom' refers to choices made within a given framework of values, preferences, and desires. It is the freedom to choose between alternatives that are already available and understood within one's current worldview. 'Vertical freedom' refers to the deeper, transformative capacity of the human person to transcend a given framework of values or preferences. It involves a radical reorientation or conversion in which the individual moves beyond self-interest or prior conditioning to embrace new, higher levels of moral or existential truth. It is the freedom to become something fundamentally different or more authentic, often involving moral or spiritual conversion. This last one, Lonergan calls 'conversion.'

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Intellectual Conversion

Since this vertical 'movement' can occur in multiple domains, the actualization of this 'Vertical Freedom' can take three shapes: intellectual, moral, and religious. Lonergan defines intellectual conversion – the first of this set of three – as 'a radical clarification and, consequently, the elimination of an exceedingly stubborn and misleading myth concerning reality, objectivity, and human knowledge.'[10] It is the shift from a naive or commonsense view of reality to a more critical, reflective understanding of how we know truth and what constitutes truth. Lonergan frames this conversion as moving from an uncritical, child-like reliance on sensory experience to a recognition of the operations of the mind – insight, judgment, and reasoning – as the basis for understanding reality. In the idea of the 'myth' that one has to free oneself from, we find traces of Ricoeur's first and second *naiveté*: the latter refers to a post-critical re-engagement with reality, following a stage of critical analysis and skepticism.[11] Both Lonergan's and Ricoeur's concepts involve an initial, unquestioning engagement with ideas before critical reflection takes place. Intellectual conversion, for Lonergan, and the transition to second *naiveté* for Ricoeur both involve moving beyond this uncritical stage to a deeper, more reflective understanding of meaning, allowing one to engage with truth in a more profound way after critique.

Moral Conversion

Parallel and sequential to intellectual conversion, Lonergan argues, is a moral one, which he defines as a change in 'the criterion of one's decisions and choices from satisfaction to value.'[12] This means a shift in a person's motivation and decision-making process, moving one away from egoism and individual desires to altruism and the *bonum commune*. Neither personal gain nor societal rules and regulations should guide one's choices and actions, but objective values like justice, truth, and love. This conversion involves a deepened awareness of responsibility and a commitment to doing what is right and good, even at personal cost.

Lonergan's concept of moral conversion parallels several important ethical frameworks from Western philosophical and theological traditions. In Roman Catholic social thinking, the emphasis on the common good (*bonum commune*) aligns with Lonergan's idea that moral decisions should prioritize the well-being of others over individual gain.[13] Both perspectives stress a commitment to promoting collective welfare and highlight the responsibility to act altruistically. Similarly, Immanuel Kant's 'categorical imperative' advocates for moral actions guided by universal principles rather than personal desires, reflecting a movement from egoism to objective moral norms.[14] Lonergan's notion of moral conversion resonates with Kant's emphasis on duty to moral law.

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Thomas Aquinas' understanding of conscience also complements Lonergan's ideas. Aquinas asserts that individuals must follow their well-formed conscience, which applies moral principles to real situations, thus emphasizing internal moral guidance over external laws, even at the cost of one's own interests or happiness – something that has to be accepted by the moral subject as a consequence of one's informed actions.[15] In essence, all these frameworks underscore the importance of transcending self-interest to engage with broader values that contribute to the flourishing of individuals and society, reflecting a transformative vision of ethical responsibility.

Religious Conversion

Religious conversion, for Lonergan, is the most important one, following the previous ones. He defines it as: 'Religious conversion is being grasped by ultimate concern. It is other-world falling in love. It is total and permanent self-surrender without conditions, qualifications, reservations.'[16] He calls it 'being grasped by ultimate concern,' a notion almost exclusively associated with the works of the German-American theologian Paul Tillich. Tillich defines the ultimate concern as that which individuals hold as the highest priority or value in their lives. It is the focal point of their being, guiding their decisions, actions, and understanding of existence.[17] This concern transcends all other interests and commitments, functioning as the foundation of a person's identity and purpose. This concern is not religious per se: human rights, environmental sustainability, social justice, or personal relationships can easily qualify as such.

While the conversions can happen sequentially (intellectual leading to moral, and moral to religious), they are deeply interrelated. Intellectual conversion provides the critical framework for understanding truth, which informs the moral judgment of what is good. Moral conversion, in turn, leads to ethical action, which prepares a person to encounter and embrace a deeper religious transformation. Together, these conversions lead to a fully authentic life. Intellectual conversion corrects how we understand reality, moral conversion aligns our choices with objective values, and religious conversion orients our entire existence toward the divine and ultimate meaning. While intellectual conversion deals with how we know and understand, moral conversion engages the will, and religious conversion deals with the heart and soul, addressing the deepest questions of human existence. Lonergan sees these conversions as different moments in a single process of growth, where the person moves from a fragmented existence toward a more integrated life: one that aligns knowledge, value, and ultimate purpose in a unified pursuit of truth, goodness, and divine love.

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As I will argue in part two of this monograph, *Spec Ops: The Line* is a game that stimulates its (text-internal *and* text-external) players to make an intellectual, but also moral (and possibly also religious) conversion.

Video Games as Moral Laboratories

Several scholars argue that video games have emerged as the defining and even dominant form of digital culture in our contemporary era.[18] Elements of video games have extended beyond their initial boundaries and permeated various sectors of society, including the economy, labor, healthcare, and education – a phenomenon referred to as the 'videoludification of social reality.'[19] Gamification, virtual reality, augmented reality, alternative reality, and serious games are just a few examples of this trend. In this chapter, I will concentrate specifically on gamification and serious games because they both fit the theme of moral conversion.

Gamification can be a synonym of the videoludification mentioned above, but also a special 'tool' to provide ludic experiences in non-gaming contexts like education, health care, and the military. Even though the two meanings are used interchangeably in popular speech, in this monograph, I will be using the latter, narrower definition of gamification.[20] Gamification has been applied to enhance education, streamline business operations and processes, and improve organizational efficiency. It has also been utilized to engage citizens in politics and for talent assessment, including within military contexts.[21]

Serious games come from the opposite side, so to speak. If gamification is the imbuing of non-video game environments with ludic elements, serious games are the result of imbuing video games with non-traditional narrative elements.[22] Again, in popular speech, the two concepts are frequently used interchangeably. Serious games are also a *contradictio in terminis*: games are typically linked with fun, leisure, and entertainment, whereas the term 'serious' is often associated with things perceived as being the opposite of fun, such as boredom or work. Serious games seek to bring an element of enjoyment to activities that are not inherently fun.[23]

Of course, games can be – from a communication point of view (see Chapter 1) – 'serious' in at least two different ways: game-internally or game-externally. In the case of game-external serious games, the developers outside of the game's text have developed the game specifically to serve a 'serious' purpose, that is a purpose outside the appreciation of the game itself by the game-external players. This seriousness lies within the relation between the textual world and the text-external world. Examples of this sort of serious games are *Foldit* (University of Washington, 2008), developed by the University of Washington, allowing players to fold proteins to assist real-world scientific research; *Re-Mission* (Hopelab, 2006), created for young cancer patients, where players control a nanobot that battles cancer cells;

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America's Army (U.S. Army, 2002), developed by the military as the name suggests, immersing players in realistic scenarios that reflect military life and decision-making; *SPENT* (Urban Ministries of Durham, 2011) forcing players to make difficult choices under economic constraints; and *CyberCIEGE* (U.S. Navy, 2004) providing players with scenarios that enhance their understanding of network security and defense strategies.

On the other side, in the case of game-internal serious games, the seriousness is part of the game's inner textual world and of the communication between the game-internal author and game-internal player. This seriousness lies within the game's text itself, independent of the developers' intentions or the individual players' perceptions and appreciations. Examples of this kind of game include: *Gris* (Nomada Studio, 2018) allowing the players to navigate through a beautifully crafted world that reflects the protagonist's emotional journey, including feelings of loss and grief; *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017), developed in cooperation with neurodivergent advisors and conjuring up a world in which the player can experience the symptoms of psychosis and childhood trauma; *Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020), addressing the topics of death, loss, and acceptance; *That Dragon Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016), recounting the experiences of a family coping with a child's terminal illness; *PeaceMaker* (Gidi Golan, 2007), simulating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and allowing players to step into the roles of both Israeli and Palestinian leaders; and *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios, 2014), placing players in the shoes of civilians living through a civil war. Of course, in a number of examples, a case can be made that the game's seriousness is a combination of external and internal communications.

One could argue that games that focus on ethical gameplay and morality are also a category of serious games, including *Spec Ops: The Line* (as I will argue later on in this monograph). Such games allow their players to experiment with complex ethical dilemmas, including short-term and long-term consequences of their in-game choices and actions. In the next chapter, I will dive deeper into the topic of ethical gameplay.

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3 Ethical Gameplay

How Morality and Games Interact

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In the beginning of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft, 2018), the player is confronted with a moral dilemma featuring both (foreseeable) short-term and (unforeseeable) long-term consequences. The game takes place in Ancient Greece during the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE) and entangles the player (see Chapter 1) with either Kassandra or Alexios, the former being the 'canonical choice.'[1] In the mission 'The Blood Fever,' the player is sent to the village of Kausos on the Greek island of Kephallonia by Phoibe, a young girl who looks up to Kassandra and is her close friend.

Once there, the player understands that the village has been decimated by the plague, killing all but a few inhabitants. Kasandra encounters a priest who demands the execution of a local family suspected of carrying the deadly plague. The family, however, pleads for mercy, claiming they are not showing symptoms. The player must choose to either kill or save the family, effectively weighing the possibility of the family infecting the whole island versus the possibility of them being totally innocent and harmless.

If the player chooses to kill the family, they die, but the plague is contained, saving the rest of Kephallonia. However, if the player spares the family by attacking the priest and the soldiers, there are far-reaching consequences. Barnabas, Kassandra's loyal ship captain and close ally, later informs her that the plague has ravaged the island, turning Kephallonia into a graveyard. Additionally, Phoibe mentions in Athens that she too has heard about a plague devastating Kephallonia. This decision also comes up when Kassandra visits the Sanctuary of Delphi, where the Pythia references the choice Kassandra made in Kausos. Lastly, if the player skips the mission entirely, the plague eventually spreads across Kephallonia, as if the family had been spared.

Ethical Gameplay and Morality Systems

The 'The Blood Fever' mission from *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* is an example of what is known as 'ethical gameplay': 'the outcome of a game sequence in

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which players make definitive choices based on moral thinking, rather than on instrumental thinking. Ethical gameplay is, in other words, the outcome of moral play.'[2] In other words, using the terminology of the Communication-Oriented Method of Text Analysis (see Chapter 1), ethical gameplay means that text-external players usually prioritize ludic-strategical behavior over narrative-ethical behavior. An average gamer is usually primarily occupied with understanding the rules of the game to optimize his or her game progress and score. When confronted with moral puzzles, the normal fluidity of the gameplay is interrupted, forcing players to focus on the narrative delivered by the game. Instead of strategizing, the player now has to reflect ethically, not strategically.[3]

Morality Systems

The primary way developers nudge their players toward ethical gameplay is by means of an in-game 'morality system' that monitors and tracks certain behavior of the player. Generally speaking, video game morality systems can be defined as either implicit or explicit digital systems within a particular game that rate certain player actions and/or choices on the basis of a presupposed ethical framework.[4] Such a morality system can be implicit or explicit in nature. In the case of the latter, the text-internal player does know that it is being judged by the game, when it is being judged, and what the verdict is. Of course, the text-external player may or may not know this, depending on his or her awareness of what is happening in the game. Examples include the original *Mass Effect* trilogy (BioWare, 2007–2012), the *Dishonored* series (Arkane Studios, 2012–2017), *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008), and *Fallout: New Vegas* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2010) which all explicitly communicate to their players when and how they are ethically judged by the morality system. An implicit morality system, on the other hand, is a bit more intricate: the text-internal player does not know it is being judged by the game, when it is being judged, and what the verdict is. The text-external player, on the other hand, may or may not know this, depending on information obtained in previous gameplay and/or through external information found outside the game. Examples include *Undertale* (Toby Fox, 2015), the *Metro* series (4A Games, 2010–2019), *BioShock* (Irrational Games, 2007), and *BioShock 2* (2K Marin, 2010).

Most of these games only reveal their morality system to the player if and when the player retries the game (or portions of it), experimenting with different solutions to various problems resulting in differences in the game's outcome. Here, a text-external player has an advantage over the text-internal one, since a person outside the game text can easily obtain information on the existence of the game's morality system from information sources other than the game itself.

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History of Ethical Gameplay

The evolution of moral choice mechanics in video games has witnessed several key innovations over the years.[5] One of the earliest examples is *Streets of Rage* (AM7, 1991), where players face a choice at the end of a cooperative campaign: they can either collaborate to defeat the final boss or betray each other for the chance to claim victory. This decision leads to different endings and alters the player's perception of collaboration versus competition. However, this early implementation ultimately resulted in a binary outcome of good or bad endings, and the subsequent years saw a regression in moral choice due to the prevalence of linear gameplay experiences. In 1995, *I Have No Mouth*, *and I Must Scream* (Cyberdreams) introduced a more formalized approach to moral choices through its point-and-click mechanics and a unique 'Spiritual Barometer' mechanic that visually represented players' moral positions. Actions deemed good or evil would change the color surrounding an avatar's portrait, affecting the game's ending. This system can be seen as a precursor to modern morality meters.

Fable (Lionhead, 2004) aimed to innovate player agency with its moral choice system, rewarding or punishing actions with either good or evil points. However, it fell short by presenting a binary moral landscape, where players found it easier to be evil than good, ultimately leading to criticism for lack of meaningful impact. *BioShock* (Irrational Games, 2007) further developed the exploration of moral choices by incorporating intrinsic and extrinsic rewards tied to player interactions with the 'Little Sisters.' Players could choose to harvest these children for significant extrinsic rewards or save them for intrinsic satisfaction. Despite this complexity, the outcome became more about timing than meaningful differentiation between good and evil, as players still ended up with comparable resources. In the same year, *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008) presented moral choices that had tangible impacts on the game world. Players could choose between disarming or detonating a nuclear bomb in the town of Megaton, where the destruction resulted in not only the loss of life but also the closure of shops and missions. The morality of the choice was underscored by the player's active role in the decision-making process.

Grand Theft Auto IV (Rockstar Games, 2008) took a different approach by framing moral choices within the context of relationships rather than traditional good vs. evil dichotomies. Players grappled with decisions that were rooted in personal connections, making the moral implications more complex and relatable to real-world ethics. The release of *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012) marked a significant evolution in the handling of moral choice in games. The game placed players in high-stakes situations that demanded quick, impactful decisions, often accompanied by a timer to enhance the sense of urgency. Unlike many earlier titles, *The Walking Dead* featured a defined protagonist with a strong narrative voice, which allowed players to feel a greater emotional connection to the choices they were making.

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Points of Criticism

Players, critics, and scholars have pointed out a number of serious problems with morality systems.[6] Morality systems in video games often fall short of capturing the nuanced complexities of real-world ethical dilemmas, particularly from the perspective of the text-external reader, who can relate the text-internal world to the text-external one. This critique highlights several key limitations of such systems.

First, the prevalent reliance on binary choices fails to reflect the intricate moral landscapes present in real life. Many moral dilemmas are not strictly dichotomous; they involve a spectrum of possibilities that require deeper consideration and cannot be reduced to simple 'good' or 'evil' decisions. Second, the potential for an ideal solution within these systems often does not resonate with real-world morality. In many cases, the structure of morality systems implies that a singular, perfect choice exists, which contradicts the often-conflicting values and perspectives that characterize genuine moral decision-making. Third, the selective morality and inconsistency inherent in rule systems can create dissonance for players. The moral framework presented in the game may vary based on the situation, leading to confusion regarding the consequences of actions and the underlying ethical principles.

Additionally, the design of these systems is often susceptible to manipulation. Players can exploit the load/save functionality, a feature exclusively accessible to text-external players, allowing them to revert to previous choices to explore alternate outcomes without facing the genuine consequences of their actions. Moreover, the choices presented within these morality systems frequently lack significant ludic or narrative repercussions beyond minor variations in the game's ending. This limitation can result in a superficial engagement with the game's moral landscape, as players may feel that their decisions do not substantially impact the world or the story. And finally, the issue of ludo-narrative dissonance arises when the mechanics of gameplay conflict with the narrative implications of moral choices (as discussed in Chapter 1). This dissonance can lead to player frustration and detachment, as the actions taken within the game may not align with the story's intended moral messages, further detracting from the overall experience.

From Tame to Super Wicked Problems

To further explore the concept of ethical gameplay and the moral reflections it presents to players, I would like to introduce the notion of 'wicked problems.'[7] This term originates from the field of social engineering, where it was first introduced by Rittel and Webber in 1973.[8] Conklin expanded the definition in 2006, making it applicable to various scientific disciplines.[9] Wicked problems, in essence, are issues that lack a clear ideal solution, a definitive

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strategy to reach that solution, and the opportunity to experiment with different outcomes.

Wicked Problems

Conklin outlines six formal characteristics of wicked problems: (1) A problem is not fully understood until a solution has been proposed. The information required to comprehend the issue is contingent upon one's approach to resolving it. (2) Wicked problems lack a stopping rule. Problem-solvers do not cease their efforts because they have achieved perfection; rather, they do so due to external factors such as running out of time, money, or patience. (3) Solutions to wicked problems are not classified as right or wrong. The quality of the solution's outcome cannot be definitively assessed, as there are no established criteria for evaluation. The results are deemed 'good' or 'good enough' instead of 'right' or 'wrong.' (4) Each wicked problem is inherently novel and unique, making it impossible to reduce it to a previously experienced or described issue. (5) Each solution to a wicked problem is a 'one-shot operation.' Experimentation is not feasible because the consequences of a decision cannot be reversed to explore alternative choices. (6) Wicked problems do not come with predetermined alternative solutions. It is possible that no solution exists, or there may be a solution that has yet to be conceived.

Sicart applied the concept to games and ethical gameplay, formulating ten characteristics of the 'perfect' moral dilemma.[10] (1) The player's awareness of potential outcomes is constrained by ethical cognitive friction between the semiotic and procedural domains, meaning they do not possess complete information regarding the possible results of a dilemma. (2) The consequences of ethical gameplay dilemmas cannot be predicted solely by understanding the procedural aspects of the game. Familiarity with the system's mechanics is insufficient for making decisions, as certain elements influencing the outcome remain unknown to the player. (3) The game system's evaluation of the outcome will not be conveyed to the player in quantifiable terms. (4) Once players have made a choice, they cannot revert to a state prior to that decision.

(5) Each solution to an ethical gameplay dilemma transitions players into a new game state, making it impossible to return to previous conditions. Every decision carries weight. (6) Ethical gameplay dilemmas often lead to a clash between procedural and semantic levels, suggesting non-optimal strategies imbued with emotional, cultural, and contextual significance. (7) Ethical gameplay dilemmas are generally unique, and the structure of a particular dilemma should not be replicated throughout the game. (8) Ethical gameplay dilemmas illuminate the moral dimensions of both the semiotic and procedural domains, representing the values that designers intend to convey through the game. (9) There is no definitive solution to an ethical gameplay dilemma; players must assess the morality of their choices. (10) Players do not have the

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option to replay; the decisions they make commit them to their chosen path, and the game, in the state defined by their choices, is only playable once.

Using Rittel's and Webber's concept, and Sicart's adaptation, I differentiate between four levels of ethical gameplay, each providing more challenge to the player (Table 3.1): tame, semi, really, and super wicked problems. The constitutive parts (criteria) of this differentiation are: (1) the extent to which the specific problem stimulates narratological-ethical instead of ludological-strategical gameplay; (2) the extent to which it is possible to solve the problem by exploiting the loading/saving mechanism of the game; (3) the presence of an 'ideal solution;' and (4) the presence and nature of any feedback given to the player by the game.

Tame Moral Problems

In most cases of ethical gameplay, the moral dilemmas presented are not particularly complex or 'wicked' but rather straightforward and 'tame.' For instance, in *Fallout 3*, morality points, known as 'karma points,' are assigned based on a simple morality scale that tracks the player's actions as either 'good' or 'bad,' with a small possibility of being 'neutral.' The player's moral status is determined by a combination of good and evil deeds, resulting in a single statistic. Titles for these levels are stereotypical, ranging from 'protector' and 'messiah' (for good karma) to 'devil' (for bad karma), with neutral positions like 'true mortal.'

Positive karma is awarded for actions clearly seen as morally good, such as donating to a church, helping repair infrastructure, or rescuing enslaved characters. Conversely, negative karma is assigned for actions considered morally wrong, like stealing, lying, or killing innocents. While these moral guidelines are simplified, they generally align with widely accepted ethical norms, making the moral choices in the game easy to navigate for most players. But they

Table 3.1 Overview of the different levels of 'wickedness' of moral problems presented to the gamer by the game, ranging from tame and semi-wicked problems, to really and super wicked problems.

	Tame	*Semi*	*Really*	*Super*
Stimulation of narrative-ethical (N.E.) or ludic-strategical behavior (L.S.)	L.S.	N.E.	N.E.	N.E.
Exploiting the load/save system	Yes	Yes	No	No
Availability of an ideal solution	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Presence of explicit feedback given to the player	Yes	Yes	No	Irrelevant

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do not really challenge the player to swap their ludic-strategical behavior for a more narrative-ethical one.

These 'tame' moral dilemmas do not present a genuine ethical challenge for the player, meaning they do not encourage any narrative-ethical gameplay. The player is fully aware that their actions are being judged by the game, and due to the explicit morality system, they always know when and how this judgment occurs. Each moral decision follows a simple, dualistic structure, implying that an ideal ethical solution is attainable. Furthermore, players can easily exploit the save/load system to experiment with different outcomes and select the one that best aligns with their chosen moral stance, whether they play as the 'good guy' or the 'bad guy.'

Semi-Wicked Moral Problems

Fortunately, some games offer more complex ethical gameplay than the tame examples mentioned above. In these games, 'semi-wicked' moral dilemmas are presented in such a way that the player's typical ludic-strategic behavior shifts toward a more narrative-ethical approach, encouraging moral reflection. An example of such is the mission 'Wrex and the Genophage' from *Mass Effect*. The trilogy is set in a future where interstellar travel connects various advanced races in the Milky Way, governed by the Citadel Council. The Krogan race, known for its violent nature, was made infertile by the Genophage, a biological weapon developed by the Salarians and used by the Turians to halt Krogan expansion.

During the mission on the planet Virmire, the player (Shepard) learns that Saren, a rogue Turian, seeks to neutralize the Genophage and breed a Krogan army. Shepard must convince Wrex, a Krogan teammate, to stop Saren, despite Wrex's desire to save his species. The player's decision – whether to convince or kill Wrex – has moral consequences reflected by earning renegade or paragon points. While the dilemma seems complex, players can easily explore all outcomes by exploiting the save/load system, revealing that the ideal solution is to persuade Wrex, minimizing the ethical depth of the situation. This allows the player to explore all possible outcomes and their unforeseen consequences empirically. This dynamic is particularly effective in games with explicit morality systems that feature short-term consequences. While the moral dilemmas are significant within the narrative, they often lack real impact on the gameplay mechanics themselves.

Really Wicked Moral Problems

'Really wicked' moral challenges can enter into the gameplay when the exploitation of the save/load system is prevented by the use of an implicit morality system and/or the implementation of long-term consequences. An

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example of this is the 'Little Sister Dilemma' from *BioShock*, a game explicitly set as a criticism of the Russian-American philosopher Ayn Rand.[11] In the underwater dystopia of Rapture, the player has to attain 'Adam,' a mysterious fluid that enhances the user's physical, mental, and parapsychological capacities. This Adam is procured from the body of so-called 'Little Sisters,' bio-engineered little girls. The player can choose to 'harvest' each and every Little Sister, earning a lot of Adam points, but killing the girls in the process. Another option is to 'rescue' them, leaving them very much alive but seriously messing with the Adam procuring process.

The game does have a morality system, but since it is implicit, its existence is not telegraphed to the player in any way or capacity. The choice stimulates narrative-ethical versus ludic-strategical behavior, even making this contrast the main point of its moral dilemma: does the player choose for his or her own good (harvesting the Little Sisters) or against his or her own interests (rescuing them)? The load/save system can be used to discover the short-term consequences of either option, but does not reveal their long-term consequences. Eventually, the player has to find out that – after saving three Sisters in a row – a special delivery of Adam is made available to level the game from a ludological perspective.

Super Wicked Moral Problems

However, all examples above – including *BioShock* and its 'really' wicked problems – have one thing in common: they all suggest the possibility of an ideal solution to the problem they propose to the player. What happens when there is no such solution? Enter the category of the 'super' wicked problems. An example, again from *Mass Effect*, can be found in the mission 'Virmire,' where Shepard locates the hideout of the rogue Turian, Saren, and plans to destroy it with a nuclear device. However, as the mission unfolds, Shepard's two teammates, Ashley Williams and Kaiden Alenko, become pinned down in separate locations. Both characters have a significant history with Shepard, including strong emotional ties.

The player is forced to make a difficult decision: save one teammate and leave the other to die. The game pauses until the player chooses, and there is no option to revise the decision afterward. No matter how many times the player reloads, it is impossible to save both. In this case, *Mass Effect*'s otherwise explicit morality system remains neutral, offering no guidance or points. This is a prime example of a truly wicked problem, where there is no ideal solution – only a choice between two equally devastating outcomes.

As we will see in the second part of this monograph, *Spec Ops: The Line* is also heavily involved in ethical gameplay, even if in a very twisted and distorted way. The game stimulates narrative-ethical gameplay by suggesting a virtually nonexistent in-game morality system, producing criticism regarding

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ethical gameplay in video games in general, as well as moral dilemmas of the most wicked kind.

Notes

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4 Anti-War Video Games
A Paradox

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In the first-person multiplayer *Verdun* (2016), developed by M2H and Blackmill Games, some players reported sightings of a large crucifix amid the rubble of the game's battlefield. In 2020, a *Reddit* user with the poetic handle BootyMeatDingleSack posted a screenshot of the scene (see Figure 4.1) with the question: 'Is this an easter egg or part of the map or what?'[1] Similar observations were shared by players like Jamovitz Caulton and BIGChris, who posted screenshots titled 'I found Jesus' and 'Jesus with us!' on *Steam*'s community pages in 2019 and 2020, respectively.[2]

These visual references in *Verdun* might evoke the many roadside Calvaries scattered across Belgium and northern France, where these crucifixes are commonly found on the outskirts of small towns and villages. The name 'Calvary' stems from the name of the place where Jesus was crucified according to the New Testament. Commonly, a traditional Calvary depicts

Figure 4.1 Scene from the game *Verdun*.

Source: M2H/Blackmill Games.

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not only a crucified Jesus, but also other characters from the Gospels' Passion stories, like Mary, John, or the two thieves who were crucified alongside Jesus.[3] Another possibility is that this is a reference to the numerous photos of crucifixes standing amid the rubble of completely destroyed towns and villages during and after the First World War, for example in Misery (near the Somme), made by Canadian photographer William Ivor Castle in March 1917 (see Figure 4.2).[4]

Figure 4.2 A crucifix left standing in the town of Misery (Belgium), March 1, 1917. Source: William Ivor Castle.

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Yet another possibility, also mentioned in BootyMeatDingleSack's 2020 *Reddit* post, resonates with a longstanding tradition of crucifixion imagery in World War I propaganda. For instance, during the war, sensationalized reports claimed that German soldiers had crucified a Canadian officer, a narrative that circulated widely and was used to stoke anti-German sentiment. *The Times*, on May 10th, 1915, published the following 'report':

> Last week a large number of Canadian soldiers, wounded in the fighting round Ypres, arrived at the base hospital at Versculles. They all told a story of how one of their officers had been crucified by the Germans. He had been pinned to a wall by bayonets thrust through his hands and feet, another bayonet had then been driven through his throat, and, finally, he was riddled with bullets. The wounded Canadians said that the Dublin Fusiliers had seen this done with their own eyes, and they had heard the officers of the Dublin Fusiliers talking about it.[5]

Along with exaggerated Allied military reports that were reprinted in official government publications, an extensive propaganda campaign fueled anti-German hysteria worldwide. Certain stories became enduring myths, repeated and magnified over time, including claims of German soldiers cutting off children's hands as war trophies or crucifying a Canadian soldier.[6] The Canadian film *Passchendaele* (Paul Gross, 2008) features a scene where a soldier in thrown into barbed wire by an artillery shell, visually simulating a crucifixion. The name of the film is a reference to the Third Battle of Ypres in 1917, also known as the Battle of Passchendaele, Passchendaele being a small Belgian village.[7]

Anti-Violence in Video Games

Verdun is a rare example of realistic military (multiplayer) shooters featuring such a sobering and possibly very pacifist (sub)message. The image of the crucifix, as a symbol of suffering and sacrifice, stands in stark contrast to the more typical glorification of war found in most war simulators-cum-military shooter games. By placing this powerful religious icon in a brutal battlefield setting, the game might be highlighting the human cost and futility of war, undermining any sense of the heroism or excitement typically associated with these kinds of games. The image of a crucifix also evokes themes of moral suffering, guilt, and redemption, which could be read as a criticism of both the violence inherent to war and the (text-external and text-internal) player's own participation in simulated violence. *Verdun*'s crucifix is not central to the game itself; it is more or less a footnote to the rest of the game, which is mostly unconcerned about and unencumbered by its own violent theme and

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game mechanics. Other games take the anti-war theme a lot further, placing it front and center, not infrequently invoking the horrors of the First World War.

Cannon Fodder

Cannon Fodder (1993) is such an example and it stands as a unique entry in the history of war-themed video games, not only for its gameplay mechanics but also for its potent anti-war message, delivered through a combination of satire, dark humor, and symbolic imagery.[8] Developed by Sensible Software and published by Virgin Interactive Entertainment, the game was built using the same engine as the popular *Sensible Soccer* (1992). Released on the 75th anniversary of the Armistice (1918–1993), the game's release coincided with that year's Remembrance Day, November 11, a date of significant importance in Commonwealth countries for commemorating fallen soldiers. The developers' decision to feature a prominent red poppy, a symbol of remembrance particularly in the United Kingdom, immediately sparked controversy, especially because the poppy is a registered trademark of the Royal British Legion (RBL). The RBL provides social and financial support to military veterans and uses the poppy as a symbol of tribute to those who died in the First World War and subsequent conflicts.

The game opens with a red poppy taking center stage, setting the tone for its sharp critique of war. Each time a player's in-game soldiers die, their names are listed in a tribute screen adorned with two large poppies (see Figure 4.3), accompanied by somber music and a new gravestone on the hillside (see Figure 4.4).[9] This imagery strongly evokes the poem 'In Flanders Fields' by Canadian Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae, which commemorates fallen soldiers in the First World War and famously closes with the lines, 'We shall not sleep, though poppies grow/in Flanders fields.' By invoking this iconic symbol, *Cannon Fodder* merges the playful medium of video games with serious reflections on the wastefulness of warfare regarding human lives.

However, this blending of symbolism was not well received by everyone. On October 26, 1993, *The Daily Star* accused the game of being a 'monstrous' insult to those who had perished in war, describing it as 'shameful' and warning the public not to purchase it.[10] Other media soon followed suit. However, *Amiga Power*'s December 1993 issue featured a review of *Cannon Fodder* that used the poppy prominently on the cover, alongside the provocative headline 'Total War' (Issue #32).[11] In response to this backlash, Sensible Software was forced to remove the poppy from its marketing materials and alter the design of the poppies in-game to avoid infringing upon the Royal British Legion's intellectual property. A disclaimer was also added at the game's start, clarifying that *Cannon Fodder* was 'not in any way endorsed by the Royal British Legion.'

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Figure 4.3 A screenshot from the game Cannon Fodder: the game's end screen.
Source: Sensible Software/Virgin Interactive Entertainment.

Figure 4.4 A screenshot from the game Cannon Fodder: the field of graves.
Source: Sensible Software/Virgin Interactive Entertainment.

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John Hare, co-founder of Sensible Software, addressed the controversy, stating that the RBL's primary concern was the unauthorized use of their symbol. Hare noted that the RBL had initially demanded £500 in compensation to settle the matter, which Sensible Software paid, though Hare maintained that the intent of the game was to make players realize 'just how senseless war is.'[12] Despite this, the game's reception among players and critics was overwhelmingly positive. It sold over 100,000 copies within its first year of release, and critics praised the game for its nuanced portrayal of war. *Amiga Format* described it as 'extremely thought-provoking' and possibly 'the most anti-war game' they had encountered.[13] Similarly, in his analysis of the controversy, Stuart Brown lauded the game for being a war game with 'nuance,' something rare within the genre.[14] The instruction manual explicitly reminds players that 'war is not a game':

> And on a more serious note: don't try playing this at home, kids, because war is not a game-war, as Cannon Fodder demonstrates in its own quirky little way, is a senseless waste of human resources and lives. We hope that you never have to find out the hard way.[15]

Cannon Fodder is certainly not the only anti-war game on the market, but it is perhaps the loudest. Other examples include games like *Haze* (Free Radical Design, 2008), *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios, 2014), *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* (Ubisoft Montpellier, 2014), and *11–11: Memories Retold* (Aardman Animations and DigixArt, 2018).

Other Examples

Haze is a first-person shooter set in a dystopian future controlled by a powerful corporation. Players assume the role of a soldier who gradually becomes aware of the manipulation and use of performance-enhancing drugs by his superiors, leading to disillusionment with the war effort. The game was praised for its idea but criticized for its execution.[16] *This War of Mine* is a survival game set in a fictional war-torn city, where players manage a group of civilians trying to survive amidst food shortages, enemy threats, and moral dilemmas. The gameplay focuses on scavenging for resources and making difficult choices to keep the group alive. According to *PC Gamer*, the game explores 'the harrowing realities of living amid war' by forcing players to make difficult choices that impact the lives of their characters.[17]

Valiant Hearts: The Great War is a puzzle-adventure game set during World War I, following the intertwined stories of four characters. The game combines historical events with personal narratives, and players solve puzzles, explore environments, and experience the emotional struggles of soldiers and civilians. The game was praised for its message, but – because of

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its cartoonish art style – also criticized for being tone-deaf.[18] And *11–11: Memories Retold* is a narrative-driven adventure set during World War I, featuring a painterly art style. The game explores the perspectives of a German soldier and a Canadian photographer as their stories intersect against the backdrop of the Great War, focusing on their personal journeys and experiences.[19]

Characteristics

The games discussed above, including *Cannon Fodder*, share several key elements that distinguish them from your standard, middle-of-the-road war game. (1) All of these games carry a strong anti-war message, focusing on the moral complexities and devastating consequences of conflict rather than glorifying combat. Each title critiques war's senselessness, often presenting war as a futile and tragic exercise. *Cannon Fodder* uses dark humor and a satirical tone to expose the pointless cycle of violence, with gravestones marking fallen soldiers as fresh recruits eagerly replace them, reflecting the endless churn of war. *Haze* critiques the manipulation of soldiers by corporations and governments, highlighting how individuals are dehumanized and exploited by powerful systems. *This War of Mine* explores war through the eyes of civilians, showing the harsh realities of survival in a besieged city, where the impacts of war are felt far beyond the battlefield. *Valiant Hearts* focuses on personal stories in World War I, emphasizing the emotional cost of war on soldiers and their families. And *11–11: Memories Retold* tells the intersecting stories of a German soldier and a Canadian photographer during World War I, using their narratives to reflect on the tragic consequences of war from multiple perspectives.

(2) All games focus on the personal dimension of war and conflict, prioritizing individual human experiences and emphasizing the emotional toll of war rather than solely focusing on anonymized action or strategy. Characters are depicted as vulnerable and relatable, often caught in the midst of forces beyond their control. *Valiant Hearts* follows four characters in World War I, whose personal motivations – ranging from love to loss – drive the story, allowing players to experience the war through their eyes. *This War of Mine* places players in control of a group of civilians, forcing them to navigate the daily struggles of survival in war-torn environments. *11–11: Memories Retold* similarly focuses on the emotional journeys of two men on opposite sides of the conflict, exploring their relationships and the shared humanity that persists despite the war. And *Cannon Fodder*, though more stylized, personalizes each soldier's death by naming the fallen and showing the gravestones accumulating over time, providing an emotional reminder of the human cost of conflict.

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(3) Most of the games discussed present players with difficult moral choices, often forcing them to confront the ethical complexities of war. The traditional black-and-white morality of war is blurred, emphasizing the ambiguity of decisions made in the heat of conflict.

This War of Mine is known for its brutal moral choices, where players must decide whether to steal or sacrifice to ensure survival, highlighting the difficult decisions civilians face in wartime.

Haze places the player in the role of a soldier who begins to question the lies he has been told, grappling with the ethics of blind loyalty to corrupt authority. And *Valiant Hearts* and *11–11: Memories Retold* explore the moral dilemmas faced by soldiers, such as choosing between loyalty to their country or personal values, or the emotional strain of living through a war that seems futile.

(4) Moreover, these games move away from the traditional portrayal of soldiers as heroic figures, depicting them instead as vulnerable, flawed, or manipulated. War is not depicted as a platform for heroism but rather as a deeply tragic and dehumanizing experience. *Cannon Fodder* humanizes soldiers by showing how easily they are replaced and how their deaths are treated as mere numbers, stripping away any notions of heroism and focusing instead on the relentless nature of war. *Haze* portrays soldiers as victims of manipulation, controlled through drugs and propaganda, exploring themes of exploitation and disillusionment. *Valiant Hearts* offers a more emotional, human-centered portrayal of soldiers during World War I, focusing on their vulnerabilities and relationships. And *11–11: Memories Retold* emphasizes that soldiers on both sides of the conflict are ordinary people, neither heroes nor villains, but rather individuals trapped in the machinery of war.

(5) Last of all, these games stand out among their peers because of their experimenting with artistic styles, storytelling techniques, and gameplay mechanics to convey their messages about war in unique and impactful ways. *Cannon Fodder* uses a combination of lighthearted graphics and satirical gameplay, contrasting the game's cartoonish aesthetic with its serious message about the human cost of war. *Valiant Hearts* adopts a comic-book style and puzzle-based mechanics to tell a heart-wrenching story about war's impact on individuals. *11–11: Memories Retold* features a painterly visual style and dual narrative perspectives, allowing players to experience World War I from both sides in an emotionally charged narrative. *Haze* uses hallucinatory visuals and disorienting gameplay to underscore the manipulation of soldiers, while *This War of Mine* employs a stark, grim aesthetic to simulate the harsh realities of war from a civilian perspective.

Spec Ops: The Line shares these five characteristics of the anti-war video games genre, as we will discuss in the next part of this monograph.

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Violence in Video Games

Anti-war games like *Cannon Fodder* or *Valiant Hearts* are still a minority within the wider world of video games: most video games utilize violence gratuitously as a narrative device. This is especially true for the genre at the opposite end of the spectrum, so to speak, namely the realistic military shooter-cum-war simulator games, such as *Battlefield* (DICE e.a., 2002–2021), *Call of Duty* (Digital Illusions CE e.a., 2003–2023), *Crysis* (Crytek, 2007–2021), *Medal of Honor* (Dreamwork Interactive e.a., 1999–2020), *Sniper Elite* (Rebellion Developments, 2005–2022), and many more.

The topic of video game violence is widely debated among both scholars and critics.[20] Some titles have faced bans or discontinuation due to their graphic portrayals of violence or the perceived glorification of criminal acts. Notable examples include *Rape Day* (2019), where players plan a rape, *Pakistan Army Retribution* (Punjab Information Technology Board, 2014), based on the 2014 Peshawar school massacre, and *Hatred* (Destructive Creations, 2015), which features a misanthropic character on a genocidal mission.[21]

The most famous example of moral outcry concerning a video game is, arguably, the 'No Russian' mission from *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2009) and its remastered version in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 Campaign Remastered* (2020). Players assume the role of an undercover CIA agent infiltrating a terrorist group led by Vladimir Makarov. The mission involves a shocking sequence where players participate in a mass shooting at an airport, targeting innocent civilians. The objective is to maintain cover, making it a morally complex and controversial gameplay experience. The scene generated significant backlash for its graphic violence and ethical implications, raising questions about the portrayal of terrorism in video games.[22]

By conceptualizing games as digitally mediated ludo-narrative texts and employing the Communication-Oriented Method of Text Analysis (see Chapter 1), there are three distinct entry points for discussing violence in video games:

1. The 'real author' perspective focuses on game creators and publishers. What moral responsibilities do they hold? How does the industry protect minors from excessive violence? Are disclaimers and classification systems effective?
2. The 'real readers' perspective examines individual players' experiences. What are the real-world impacts of in-game violence on players' psychological well-being?
3. The text-internal author-reader perspective analyzes violence within the game's narrative. What narrative functions does violence serve, and how are players positioned regarding in-game violence and their participation in it?

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The first two perspectives are text-external, while the third is strictly text-internal.

Narrative Properties

If we focus on the third option, as we do in this monograph, we can distinguish five distinct narrative properties of game violence: (1) motivation for the protagonist, (2) trivialization of violence, (3) dehumanization of victims, (4) moralization of violence as an ethical option, and (5) problematization of violence.[23]

The motivation for violence in digital games often stems from the protagonist's experiences of personal loss or trauma, which compels them to act violently against their adversaries. This is evident in series like *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007–2023), where the hero's motivations are tied to the murder of loved ones, creating a context that justifies their violent actions as retaliation. Such narratives often lead to moral complexities, as players are positioned to empathize with the protagonist's motivations while engaging in violent gameplay, suggesting that within certain contexts, violence can be viewed as a justified response to prior aggression.

The second narrative property of in-game violence is trivialization, wherein violence is portrayed as a carefree and enjoyable aspect of gameplay. The player's character experiences violence without significant consequences, while the violence it inflicts is equally lighthearted and fun, transforming the experience into a power fantasy. Adversaries are depicted as forgettable entities, solely existing to be defeated. Game series like *Serious Sam* (Croteam, 2001–2022) and *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar, 1997–2021) exemplify this with over-the-top violence that is often accompanied by humorous commentary. As a result, in-game deaths lose their meaning, reducing them to mere gameplay mechanics rather than serious events.

The third narrative property of violence in digital games is alienation, which emphasizes the dehumanization of in-game enemies, making them ideal targets for players. Characters are often portrayed as non-human or devoid of relatability, facilitating violent actions without moral objections. This dehumanization allows players to rationalize their violent acts as ethically justified, reinforcing the notion that eliminating such foes contributes positively to the game world. Examples include aliens in the *Doom* series (id Software, 1993–2020) and German soldiers in the *Wolfenstein* series (id Software, 1992; Raven Software, 2009; Gray Matter Interactive, 2001; MachineGames, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019). Russians and Arabs have especially been used as 'cannon fodder,' who can be killed by the player without any reason given.[24] *Spec Ops: The Line* criticizes precisely this all-Arabs-are-evil trope extensively, as we will discuss in the second part of this monograph.

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In video games, moralization involves presenting players with choices that can lead to either violent or non-violent outcomes when faced with challenges. Game series like *Assassin's Creed*, *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios, 2012–2022), and *Metro* (4A Games, 2010–2024) implement morality systems to monitor player actions, influencing both gameplay and narrative outcomes (see Chapter 3). As discussed earlier in this monograph, while these systems aim to reflect the moral consequences of players' choices, they are often criticized for their binary structure and potential ludo-narrative dissonance, which can disrupt the intended storytelling.

The fifth and final characteristic of violence in video games is problematization. In these games, the text-internal player cannot evade its moral responsibility for violent actions. The player is not given the justification of reacting to prior violence, nor does it face dehumanized enemies lacking dignity who can be dispatched at will. Furthermore, there are no alternative non-violent options presented to it. Consequently, the player bears the entire weight of its decisions and actions in the game world.

Being an anti-war game disguised as a middle-of-the-road military shooter, this is exactly what *Spec Ops: The Line* does, as we will see in the next part of this monograph.

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Part II

Analysis

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5 The Story of *Spec Ops: The Line*

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As I have already related in this monograph's introduction, in January 2024, *Spec Ops: The Line* was unexpectedly removed from several digital platforms. Publisher 2K explained that this decision was due to the expiring of various partnership licenses. Game magazine *Polygon* speculated that the licensing issues were likely tied to the game's use of tracks by artists such as Alice in Chains, Deep Purple, and Jimi Hendrix. In response to this, Cory Davis, the lead designer of the game, expressed frustration on X, stating, 'It makes no sense – especially because the themes in @SpecOpsTheLine are more relevant now than ever.'

In this chapter, I will delve into the history of the series *Spec Ops*, as well as into the development history of *Spec Ops: The Line* and its inspirational sources. Next, I will summarize the game plot itself, the moral choices the game appears to present to its players, and the various endings the player can eventually reach.

History, Development, Inspiration, and Reception

The *Spec Ops* series, which began in 1998 with *Spec Ops: Rangers Lead the Way*, carved out a niche within the military tactical shooter genre, appealing to fans of realistic, squad-based gameplay (see Table 5.1). The series was initially focused on providing an immersive tactical experience in which players took on the role of elite soldiers, managing a squad through military missions. While never achieving blockbuster success, the early *Spec Ops* games found a moderate audience, particularly among players who valued strategy and realistic military simulation.

The first game, *Spec Ops: Rangers Lead the Way* (1998), sets the tone for the series by emphasizing tactical decision-making over run-and-gun action.[1] Developed by Zombie Studios and published by Ripcord Games, it was released during a period when tactical shooters were gaining popularity, with titles like *Rainbow Six* leading the way. While the gameplay was

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Table 5.1 Overview of the *Spec Ops* series.

Name	*Year*	*Developer*	*Publisher*
Spec Ops: Rangers Lead the Way	1998	Zombie Studios	Ripcord Games
Spec Ops: Ranger Team Bravo[a]	1998	Zombie Studios	Ripcord Games
Spec Ops II: Green Berets	1999	Zombie Studios	Ripcord Games
Spec Ops II: Operation Bravo[a]	2000	Zombie Studios	Ripcord Games
Spec Ops II: Omega Squad[b]	2000	Runecraft	Ripcord Games
Spec Ops: Stealth Patrol	2000	Runecraft	Talonsoft and Take-Two Interactive
Spec Ops: Ranger Elite	2001	Runecraft	Ripcord Games
Spec Ops: Covert Assault	2001	Runecraft	Take-Two Interactive and Sony Interactive Entertainment
Spec Ops: Airborne Commando	2002	Runecraft	Ripcord Games
Spec Ops: The Line	2012	Yager Development	2K

[a]Ranger Team Bravo is an extension pack of Rangers Lead the Way; and Operation Bravo is that of Green Berets.
[b]Omega Squad is a remake of Green Berets.

praised for its realism, the game was criticized for its technical limitations and clunky controls. Still, it did well enough to warrant several sequels and spin-offs.

The follow-up, *Spec Ops II: Green Berets* (1999), continued to build on the tactical foundations of the first game but introduced more varied environments and improved multiplayer options.[2] It was generally well-received, though it continued to be overshadowed by more refined titles in the genre, such as *Rainbow Six* (Red Storm Entertainment, 1998) and *Delta Force* (NovaLogic, 1998). The early *Spec Ops* games focused heavily on military authenticity, with mission scenarios inspired by real-life operations, appealing to players interested in a more grounded portrayal of combat. However, they often lacked the polish and innovation seen in their competitors, and by the late 1990s, the tactical shooter market was becoming increasingly competitive.

In the years that followed, the series saw a number of sequels and spin-offs, including *Spec Ops II: Omega Squad* (2000) and *Spec Ops: Stealth Patrol* (2000), developed by Runecraft and published by TalonSoft in North

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America and Take-Two Interactive in Europe.[3] These titles were released for consoles like the PlayStation, marking the franchise's first foray into non-PC platforms. However, as the tactical shooter genre evolved, *Spec Ops* struggled to keep pace with competitors that were introducing more advanced gameplay mechanics, better graphics, and more engaging narratives. Game series like *Ghost Recon* (Red Storm Entertainment, Ubisoft Paris, and Ubisoft Milan, 2011–2019) and *SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs* (Zipper Interactive and Slant Six Games, 2002–2010) were raising the bar for tactical shooters, and *Spec Ops* began to lose relevance in the market.

By the early 2000s, the franchise had become somewhat stagnant. Titles like *Spec Ops: Ranger Elite* (2001) and *Spec Ops: Covert Assault* (2001) offered little innovation and failed to stand out in an increasingly crowded field.[4] *Spec Ops: Airborne Commando* (2002) attempted to shift the series toward a more action-oriented approach but was met with lukewarm reviews, and the franchise went into a long hiatus afterward.[5] The early 2000s saw the series fade into obscurity as the gaming industry continued to evolve, with players gravitating toward more sophisticated tactical shooters or opting for more accessible, action-packed military games like *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward, 2003–2024).

Despite its initial popularity in niche circles, the *Spec Ops* series was largely forgotten by the mid-2000s. The games had not achieved the same level of critical or commercial success as other military shooters of the time, and by 2002, it seemed the franchise had reached its end. However, the tactical realism that defined the series laid important groundwork for its eventual resurgence. At this point, *Spec Ops* was mostly remembered for its early contributions to the tactical shooter genre, with its emphasis on squad management and realism. The series' influence was largely overshadowed by more innovative titles, but its impact remained notable within a subset of military gaming fans. It would not be until 2012, with the release of *Spec Ops: The Line*, that the franchise would be revitalized, taking it in a radically different direction and redefining its legacy within the broader context of video game history.

Inspiration

The major inspiration for the game's story is Francis Coppola's 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*, itself an adaptation of Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899).[6]

Heart of Darkness follows Charles Marlow, a seaman who recounts his experiences working as a riverboat captain in the Congo Free State, under European colonial rule. Marlow's story begins as he shares his tale with shipmates on the River Thames, setting a reflective, dark atmosphere. Tasked with navigating the treacherous Congo River to reach a remote inner station,

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Marlow embarks on a journey filled with unexpected and disturbing revelations about European colonialism and human nature.

As Marlow makes his way past various outposts and encounters colonial officials, he notices the unsettling chaos and the brutal exploitation that characterize European enterprises in Africa. The supposedly 'civilizing mission' of Europeans is repeatedly exposed as hollow, marked by greed and violence. The character of Kurtz looms large over Marlow's journey. Kurtz, an ivory trader with a formidable reputation, has established himself as a near-mythical figure deep within the jungle. Marlow hears conflicting stories about him: he is portrayed as a brilliant leader, yet rumors suggest he has abandoned European morality, taking control of local tribes and accumulating wealth without restraint.

Reaching Kurtz's station, Marlow is confronted with shocking evidence of Kurtz's moral descent: tribal rituals, severed heads on stakes, and an environment charged with Kurtz's disturbing authority. Physically weakened yet intellectually imposing, Kurtz represents a figure consumed by both power and isolation. Marlow finds him on the brink of death, and in their interactions, Kurtz is revealed as a man who has rejected European conventions, immersed himself in the raw 'darkness' of human ambition, and lost himself in moral ambiguity. Kurtz's famous last words, 'The horror! The horror!' convey a moment of grim revelation or, perhaps, a final, futile attempt to grapple with his own actions. Marlow returns to Europe profoundly affected, unable to reconcile his experiences in Africa with the sanitized narrative of colonialism upheld by European society. As Cedric Watts summarizes:

> Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' is a rich, vivid, layered, paradoxical, and problematic novella or long tale; a mixture of oblique autobiography, traveller's yarn, adventure story, psychological odyssey, political satire, symbolic prose-poem, black comedy, spiritual melodrama, and sceptical meditation. It has proved to be 'ahead of its times': an exceptionally proleptic text.[7]

Even though the novel was adapted into a film with the same name by Nicolas Roeg in 1993, the most well-known film 'adaptation' is Coppola's 1979 *Apocalypse Now*. The latter takes place during the Vietnam War, in 1969 to be precise, and swaps the scenery of the original Africa for contemporary Asia. The film follows U.S. Army Captain Benjamin Willard, a battle-hardened soldier tasked with a dangerous mission: to track down and kill Colonel Walter E. Kurtz, a rogue American officer who has gone absent without leave (AWOL) deep in the Cambodian jungle and is rumored to be leading a local tribe in violent, cult-like activities.

The story begins with Willard in Saigon, psychologically scarred and drifting aimlessly between missions. Ordered by military intelligence to

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'terminate Kurtz's command,' he sets out on a patrol boat with a small crew, moving upriver into increasingly chaotic and surreal encounters. Along the way, Willard witnesses the bizarre effects of the war on both the American troops and the Vietnamese civilians, including a surreal scene involving Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore, a flamboyant officer who blasts Wagner's 'Ride of the Valkyries' while leading a helicopter assault to secure a surfing beach amidst intense fighting.

As Willard travels further into the jungle, the line between reality and insanity blurs, and he becomes increasingly absorbed by the figure of Kurtz. His encounters reveal both the madness and horror of the war, embodied in the contradictory behavior of soldiers, from casual atrocities to scenes of disorientation and despair. Willard's journey culminates at Kurtz's remote compound, where he meets Kurtz as a shadowy, messianic figure who has embraced his own distorted philosophy, rejecting American values and perceiving himself to be an agent of pure will and power.

Kurtz is portrayed as a man who has gone beyond the moral boundaries of conventional warfare, finding his own meaning in the chaos of the jungle. Willard's mission to 'terminate Kurtz with extreme prejudice' leads him into a final confrontation with Kurtz's ideas about civilization, violence, and freedom. Kurtz's final words, 'The horror, the horror,' echo Conrad's novella, symbolizing the dark and brutal depths of human nature that Kurtz has explored and Willard must reckon with.

In the sailor Marlow (novel) and the soldier Willard (film), we see the image of *Spec Ops: The Line*'s protagonist Walker appear, deep into 'wild' or unknown territory. Just like Marlow and Willard, Walker's mental state is permanently altered, damaged even beyond repair. All three men have to return to their respective homelands, where they can no longer fit in because of the horrors they have witnessed and – in Walker's case – committed. In the figure of Kurtz – both in the film and the novel – we find inspiration for the game's Colonel John Konrad, whose name is a homage to *Heart of Darkness*' author Joseph Conrad. Both Kurtz and Konrad share the image of being a morally ambiguous leader who has become corrupted by isolation and untamed power.[8]

Minor inspirations were taken from various other sources: the HBO series *Generation Kill* (2008), based on Evan Wright's book of the same name (2004), and the film *Jacob's Ladder* (Adrian Lyne, 1990).[9] *Generation Kill* is based on the experiences of *Rolling Stone* journalist Evan Wright, who was embedded in the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion of the United States Marine Corps during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Wright himself claims he is still haunted by the dead civilians he encountered:

> Again, you have all this romance and lore of war, of the soldier, and how they sacrificed. But the real rule of war that you learn – and this was true in

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> World War II – is that the people who suffer the most are civilians. You're safest if you're a soldier. I'm haunted by the images of people that I saw killed by my country. There's no way around that.[10]

Clearly, the in-depth description that Wright provides of the real life of soldiers fighting a war that is beyond their control was taken as the inspiration for *Spec Ops: The Line*'s portrayal of the men of Delta Force. The film *Jacob's Ladder* provided inspiration for Walker's in-game hallucinations induced by increasing psychological trauma in the Dubai war zone.

Reception

In the introduction of this monograph, I have already summed up the critical acclaim the game received from individual players, professional game critics, and game scholars. To top it off, *Spec Ops: The Line* garnered several award nominations and wins for its impactful narrative and gameplay (see Table 5.2).

However, notwithstanding this success with the critics, the game was a commercial failure, selling far less than publisher Take-Two anticipated.[12] No

Table 5.2 List of nominations and awards for *Spec Ops: The Line*.[11]

Deutscher Entwicklerpreis	Best Console Game	Won
	Best Story	Won
	Best German Game	Won
	Beste Graphics	Won
	Best Action Game	Won
Digital Dragons	European Game of the Year	Won
Dice Awards	Outstanding Achievement in Story	Nomination
Fun & Serious Game Festival	Best Game Script	Won
Golden Joystick Awards	Best Shooter	Nomination
	Best Gaming Moment: White Phosphorus	Nomination
Inside Gaming Awards	Best Narrative	Won
	Best Game Cinematography	Nomination
IGN's Best of 2012 Awards	Best PC Story	Won
	Best PS3 Story	Won
	Best Overall Story	Nomination
	Best PS3 Action Game	Nomination
	Best Xbox 360 Shooter Game	Nomination
	Best Xbox 360 Story	Nomination
European Games Award	Best European Action Game	Nomination
	Best European Console Game	Nomination
Der Deutsche Computerspielpreis	Best Studio: Yager	Won
	Best German Game	Nomination

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further releases since *Spec Ops: The Line* have been publicly announced by the publisher. Managing director Timo Ullman stated: 'If you can't compete with the big ones, the risk is too big (…) The market for "smart" or "intellectual" games is too niche. Elitist almost.'[13] Yager employees did not seem to care much for the loss of the franchise, as art director Mathias Wiese stated: 'You can imagine what kind of reference material you have to review [for the game] (…) That's not fun. You're happy when you can do something else after that.'[14] The remarks by Ullman and Wiese summarize quite neatly the reason for the paradox of the game's commercial failure vis-à-vis its cult status for gamers and its being a favorite case study for scholars: its communicative complexity and its reversal of game genre conventions makes it a game tailored for seasoned gamers looking for a more nuanced and ambiguous approach to war, conflict, and free will.

Plot Summary, Moral Choices, and Endings

The premise of the game runs as follows.[15] Six months before the beginning of the game, Dubai – one of the United Arab Emirates – is overwhelmed by unprecedented sand storms effectively cutting the city off from the rest of the world. The elite have managed to escape on time, but the ordinary citizens are stranded. Colonel John Konrad (Bruce Boxleitner), a decorated but Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)-troubled American war hero, and his 33rd 'The Damned' U.S. Battalion, who are accidentally in Dubai on a layover between Afghanistan and the United States, volunteer to execute the necessary evacuation. When ordered by the U.S. government to abandon the situation due to its hopelessness, Konrad and his men desert in order to stay and help. The last communication from inside the city hints at a caravan of more than a thousand civilians ready to break through the storm wall surrounding the city. The caravan, however, never arrives, the United Arab Emirates declares Dubai a no-man's-land, and the 33rd Battalion is publicly denounced.

Two weeks before the events of the game, a rather odd radio signal piercing through the sand wall is received: 'This is Colonel John Konrad, United States Army. Attempted evacuation of Dubai ended in complete failure. Death toll: too many.' The United States decides to send in a three-man Delta Force team to reconnoiter the situation, officially regarding the evacuation of Dubai's citizens, but very probably also to find out what has happened to the 33rd Battalion. The team consists of Captain Martin Walker (Nolan North), who served alongside Konrad in Afghanistan, First Lieutenant Alphonso Adams (Christopher Reid), and Staff Sergeant John Lugo (Omid Abtahi).

The game itself starts – very confusingly – in the middle of its own narrative. Walker, Adams, and Lugo are trying to flee Dubai by helicopter when one of the pursuing helicopters crashes into theirs. Then the game shifts to a non-disclosed 'earlier' time, when the trio enter Dubai on foot. While entering

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the outskirts of the semi-buried city, they very soon find themselves in the midst of the very complex and highly volatile political situation on the ground (see Table 5.3).

First, we have 'The Damned' 33rd Battalion under the command of Konrad. Initially, the Battalion assisted in the evacuation of the civilians of Dubai, but later, when this endeavor appeared impossible due to the extreme weather conditions, Konrad declared martial law over the city, ruling it with an iron fist. Some of Konrad's soldiers, appalled at the atrocities of their own Battalion, staged a coup against Konrad, but were defeated and killed. The few survivors now form a new faction, 'The Exiled,' colluding with the insurgents, a band of local militias who all oppose Konrad's regime. Fearing that Konrad's actions – if made public – would fuel a conflict with the United Arab Emirates, the United States has sent in a black ops Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) team (code name 'Grey Fox') to 'neutralize' all forces in Dubai. Walker's Delta team is frequently mistaken for another group: the insurgents mistake them for the 33rd Battalion, while the 33rd Battalion itself thinks Walker and his team are CIA operatives. To complicate matters even more, the CIA operatives appear to be on opposing sides of the Dubai conflict, depending only on strategic motives.

Throughout the initial turmoil, the team listens to broadcasts from an anonymous Radio-Man (voiced by Jake Busey), a former journalist-turned-DJ, who once worked with the 33rd Battalion and now acts as its spokesperson. After witnessing what appears to be the 33rd Battalion rounding up civilians, Walker decides to defy his initial orders to only engage in reconnaissance and to pursue Konrad. When they receive a broadcast of CIA agent Daniels being interrogated by the 33rd Battalion, Delta chooses to intervene. However, Daniels is already dead, and the broadcast was a trap set for another

Table 5.3 Overview of the various groups and factions within *Spec Ops: The Line* and their respective in-game goals.

Group	*Part of*	*Leaded by*	*Goals*
('The Damned') 33rd Battalion	U.S. Army	John Konrad/ Radio-Man	Evacuate civilians from Dubai/ Maintain order in Dubai.
'The Exiles'	Ex-U.S. Army	<unclear>	Oppose Konrad's rule.
Insurgents	Local citizens	<unclear>	Resist the 33rd Battalion's rule over Dubai.
Grey Fox	CIA operatives	<unclear>	Cover-up Konrad's actions to prevent war.
Delta Force	U.S. Army	Martin Walker	Evacuate civilians from Dubai/ Save the 33rd Battalion/ Find/Confront Konrad/ Do 'what is right'/ Punish 33rd Battalion/Konrad.

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CIA agent, Rick Gould. Gould helps Delta escape but is later captured and killed while attempting to assault a location called the Gate. Delta proceeds to the Gate, encountering heavy resistance from the 33rd Battalion. Delta uses white phosphorus to eliminate the opposition and advance, only to discover they have accidentally killed civilians who had been sheltered there by 'The Exiled' instead of rounded up by 'The Damned.' Enraged, Walker vows revenge and blames Konrad and the 33rd Battalion for everything that has happened so far.

Delta soon encounters another CIA agent, Jeff Riggs, who is leading an attack on the city's last water supply. Delta assists Riggs, aiming to weaken the 33rd Battalion, but Riggs instead destroys the supply, revealing his true goal: to eliminate the remaining population of Dubai in order to prevent a future UAE–USA conflict. With the city's population now facing death by dehydration, Delta heads to the radio tower to silence the Radio-Man. Lugo kills the Radio-Man, and Walker announces an evacuation effort. Adams commandeers a Black Hawk helicopter, and the team escapes the building, destroying the radio tower as they flee. This leads to the helicopter sequence from the game's opening, which Walker now seems to recall.

After crashing, Walker reunites with Adams in the desert but arrives too late to prevent Lugo from being lynched by a mob of civilians. Walker and Adams continue to the Dubai Seaside Tower (a fictional version of the famous real-life Burj Khalifa) to confront Konrad but are soon pinned down by the last of his soldiers. Adams sacrifices himself to save Walker, who then enters the Tower, where the remaining soldiers of the 33rd Battalion surrender to him. This initiates the final stage of the game, in which Walker confronts Konrad (see further for an in-depth analysis).

Development

In 2003, Rockstar was apparently working on a new installment, but it was cancelled in 2004 without details being shared with the public, except that Queens of the Stone Age frontman Josh Homme would be responsible for the sound track.[16] In 2006, the German developer Yager Development pitched a futuristic cover-based shooter to publisher 2K Games.[17] Even though 2K was not impressed, they tasked Yager with the development of a new installment in the *Spec Ops* series. A year later, the game's development began. The game was announced in December 2009, but was only published two-and-a-half years later, on June 26, 2012.[18]

Originally, the story was written by a number of German professionals – Yager being a Germany-based developer – but they were replaced by American writers Richard Pearsey, who had previously worked on TimeGate Studios' *Section 8*, and Walt Williams, who had previously worked on games

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like *BioShock 2* (2K Marin, 2010) and *Mafia II* (2K Czech, 2010), both developed and produced by K2. The soundtrack is a mix of licensed music by Alice in Chains, Deep Purple, and Jimi Hendrix – the alleged reason for pulling the game from digital game stores in 2024 – and original music by Elia Cmíral.[19]

The game has four difficulty settings: Walk on the Beach, Combat Op, Suicide Mission, and FUBAR. 'A walk on the beach' is a colloquialism for an easy job. 'Combat Op' is an abbreviation for a (standard) 'Combat Operation.' A 'suicide mission' is a kind of mission from which no or very few operatives are thought to be able to return safely. FUBAR is an acronym, used in military slang, meaning 'Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition.' Especially the last is telling, possibly being a reference to the psychological state of Martin Walker at the end of the game, since a number of possible endings (see further in this chapter) show the captain behaving in hyper-violent and irrational ways.

The game includes an online multiplayer, separately developed by Darkside Game Studios, dividing players into two different teams, the Exiles and the Damned (see further in this chapter for details concerning the various in-game factions). Classes range from Gunner, Medic, and Scavenger, to Breacher, Sniper, and Officer, all with their own weaknesses and perks. The multiplayer is excluded from the overall analysis of the game in this chapter because of its lack of narrative content.

Moral (Pseudo) Choices

Spec Ops: The Line plays an intriguing game-within-the-game. Six times it seems to offer the player a moral choice, recognizable as such by the text-internal player because of its knowledge of the conventions of ethical gameplay in contemporary video games. (This leaves room, of course, for any individual text-*external* player to *not* understand this.) These choices have, however, ludically and narratively speaking, hardly any influence on the subsequent unfolding of the game's story. *Spec Ops: The Line*'s choices are fake ones: they only intend to suggest that the text-internal player has moral agency (at least at this level), while in fact it has none. The accompanying ludo-narrative dissonance is, however, not an unintentional effect of an ill-designed form of ethical gameplay, but is deliberately intended. Let us look more closely at these six moments of pseudo-choice, and try to find out what they signify within the wider narrative of the game.

The first choice is found in Chapter 4 ('The Refugees') when Walker and his team discover McPherson, a soldier belonging to the rogue 33rd Battalion, who is violently interrogated by a CIA operative. Even though McPherson manages to kill the CIA man, he is held at gunpoint by Walker. Now, the player can either choose to shoot McPherson, leading to angry comments

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from Lugo and Adams, or let him walk away, allowing him to warn his fellow soldiers. Except for some dialogue, this choice, however, does not influence the story in any meaningful way.

The second choice is found in Chapter 7 ('The Battle'), when the player has to choose whether to save another CIA operative named Gould from the 33rd Battalion, or to save civilians who are being tortured and murdered one by one to put pressure on Gould to confess his plan of operation. Both options result in the death of both Gould – he is either shot directly by the 33rd Battalion or he dies of a heart attack induced by this torture – and of the civilians. Lugo and Adams each defend one of the two options Walker has, but resign themselves to whichever of the two courses he takes.

Now, the third choice is without a doubt the most debated one of all in both academic and critics' comments, namely the phosphorus attack (see for details earlier in this chapter under section heading 'Reception'). In Chapter 8 ('The Gate'), Walker and his team are under the impression that the 33rd Battalion is rounding up civilians in order to unleash an unspecified atrocity on them. However, there is no direct evidence of such. Walker and his team meet a large group of soldiers belonging to the 33rd Battalion who are allegedly responsible for the capture of the civilians. Now, on the scene, there is a mortar that is capable of firing white phosphorus grenades. White phosphorus is highly controversial but is, surprisingly, not officially banned. It is a kind of ammunition that has horrendous effects on unprotected victims, as the game is more than happy to communicate to the text-internal player through various texts visible on Loading Screens between levels or before a respawn.

> White phosphorus is a common allotrope used in many types of munitions. It can set fire to cloth, fuel, ammunition, and flesh. (…) Though controversial, the use of white phosphorus against personnel is not prohibited. (…) Survivors of white phosphorus often suffer severe damage to the kidneys and liver, as well as the cardiovascular and nervous systems.
>
> (Loading Screens #046, #047, and #094)

The text-internal player has two options: engaging the enemy in a conventional, head-on way, which leads to the unavoidable death of Walker and his team due to being outnumbered and eventually left without ammunition; or using the laptop by which the mortar is operated and then firing the phosphorus bombs at the enemy. The game effectively locks the player into 'choosing' to fire the mortar, since there is no other way of continuing the game's story, while at the same time communicating to the player that there is a choice to be made here (a ludo-narrative dissonance). Lugo, Adams, and Walker have a short but heated debate:

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Lugo: You're fuckin' kidding, right? That's white phosphorus.
Walker: Yeah, I know what it is.
Lugo: You've seen what this shit does! You know we can't use it.
Adams: We might not have a choice, Lugo.
Lugo: There's always a choice.
Walker: No, there's really not. (…) Okay. Prepare to fire.
Lugo: That an order?
Walker: Yeah, it is.

Walker is right; the text-internal player indeed has no choice, but this is for different reasons. Walker, at the level of the characters, suggests that firing the phosphorus is the only way to proceed toward fulfilling their goal of helping the civilians of Dubai, while actually – at the level of the text-internal player – firing is the only way to proceed through the narrative. Lugo's statement – 'There's always a choice' – is false at the level of the characters, as well as at the level of the text-internal player (inside the textual world). However, for an individual text-*external* player (outside the textual world), there is indeed a choice to be made: to proceed with the game, including the firing of the mortar, or to quit the game completely. As Brad Howard puts it: 'The only way to not commit a heinous war crime is to not play. There is no other way to win.'[20] This luxury – being able to quit – is, however, only available to the text-external player, not to the character Walker or to the text-internal player.

After having fired several phosphorus shells, Walker and his team go to check the situation. What they find defies all description: a bloody and smoldering mess of semi-charred bodies, moaning and crying before death finally puts an end to their misery. First, Walker's team finds a wounded 33rd Battalion soldier, who moans out the simple question: 'Why?' To which Walker replies, again invoking the theme of choice: 'You brought this on yourself.' And again, the option of choice is broken, as the soldier speaks one final time: 'We were helping.' And finally, an even more horrible truth dawns on Walker, Lugo, and Adams: they stumble upon the burned bodies of 47 women, men, and children – civilians the 33rd Exiled Battalion tried to rescue from, precisely, The Damned *and* Delta Force's violence.

Another Loading Screen (#096) screams this summary into the player's face: 'White phosphorus is a common allotrope used in your slaughter at The Gate. It can set fire to soldiers and the innocent civilians they are trying to help.' Lugo accuses Walker of this atrocity, while Adams tries to defend their actions:

Lugo: This is your fault, goddammit.
Adams: Stop right there, Lugo.
Lugo: But it is. He wouldn't listen!
Adams: We didn't have a choice!

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> *Lugo*: He turned us into fucking killers!
> *Adams*: That's enough, Sergeant!
> *Lugo*: No! NO!!!
> *Adams*: Control yourself! Now!
> *Walker*: We need to keep moving. (…)
> *Adams*: But, Walker … you're not … you're not even –
> *Walker*: I'm going to make these bastards pay for what they've done. Now, are you with me or not? (…) There is nothing good about what happened out there, Lugo. But our hand was forced.

Both Adams – 'we didn't have a choice' – and Walker – 'our hand was forced' – deny that they had any choice in using the mortars or not. The intriguing fact is that ludologically there is indeed no other possibility offered by the game to the text-internal player, while narratologically the game punishes it for doing something it actually had no choice about.

In the case of the first two choices described above – regarding McPherson and Gould – the alternatives to the offered pseudo-choices appear to be equal in a moral sense. With the phosphorus incident, this changes dramatically. The fourth choice (Chapter 9, 'The Road') – later turning out to be nothing but one of the hallucinations of an already mentally deranged Walker – is when the team finds two men hanging by their wrists from a bridge. Konrad, or rather Walker's externally manifested guilt, confronts him when having to choose which of the two should be executed. Walker can shoot the civilian who stole water, a capital offense in Dubai under martial law, or the soldier who was supposed to arrest him but murdered the offender's entire family in the process. If Walker stalls, Adams is shot, leading to a game over screen. And if Walker tries to leave, he will be killed by snipers.

However, this time, there is another – though a very difficult option: Walker can take out the various snipers in the vicinity, something Konrad seems to be surprised about. However, while the element of choice is again suggested, it does not really exist: the two men are actually already long dead. In trying to find a way through the middle – not having to kill either of the men – Walker only kills more concrete people (not hallucinations) in the process, making the whole situation even worse from a moral point of view.

The fifth choice is found in Chapter 11 ('Alone'). Walker finds out that CIA operative Riggs chartered Delta Force's help in securing Dubai's dwindling water supply under the false pretense of keeping it out of the 33rd Battalion's hands and in those of the civil population. This results in the utter destruction of said supply. Walker is confronted with Riggs, badly hurt and trapped under a truck, while flames are quickly approaching him. Riggs asks Walker to shoot him to save him from burning to death, but the player can also choose to walk away. Again, the choice made has hardly any ramifications for the rest of the game.

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Later on, at the same level, Walker is discussing the situation with 'Radio-Man,' a war journalist-turned-into-33rd DJ, who speaks with him via different broadcasts. Walker argues that Konrad had a choice when dealing with the Dubai situation. Radio-Man scorns him for that sentiment: 'You're one to talk. Remember The Gate? Huh? Huh? Mmmm, what is that smell? I do believe it's burnt baby!' And later to all listening to the broadcast:

> Rumor has it, [Delta Force is] trying to "rescue" even more people. You gotta love these guys. They're just gonna keep on trying, even if it kills every last one of ya. Be sure to stop by and tell 'em thanks.

The sixth and final choice – excluding the endings – is at Level 15 ('Welcome'). Walker, Lugo, and Adams have crashed in the same helicopter as shown in the introduction of the game. The three have been separated by the crash. Adams and Walker find each other in time, but this is not the case for Lugo. When they finally reach him, Lugo has been lynched by an angry mob of Dubai civilians holding Delta Force – quite correctly – responsible for the killing of the 47 others earlier on. Three options are open to the player: kill the civilians (which is justified by Adams 'for Lugo'), scare off the civilians by shooting over their heads, or do nothing (eventually the rocks thrown by the civilians will land beyond Walker and Adams). Again, the choice made has no real effect on the story: Lugo dies anyway, something Adams accuses Walker of (Figure 5.1).

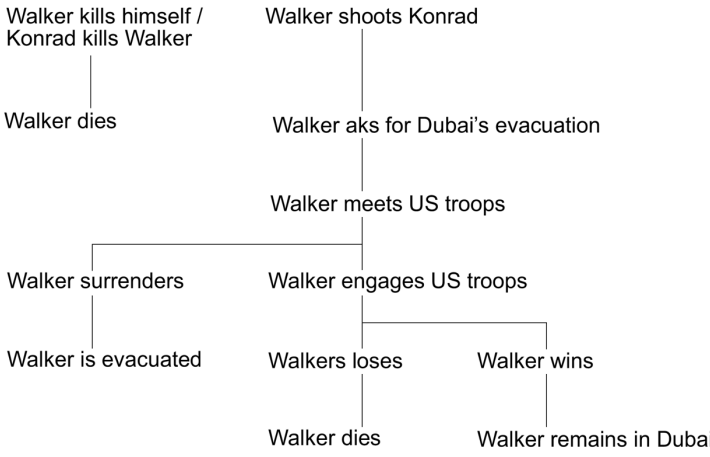

Figure 5.1 A flowchart of the possible endings of *Spec Ops: The Line*.

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Game Endings

When Walker finally finds Konrad, he learns that the colonel took his life long before Delta Force entered Dubai. Two possible outcomes can be chosen now (see Figure 5.1). Walker can allow Konrad to shoot him and/or shoot his own reflection next to him, both resulting in Walker shooting himself through the head. Walker can also shoot Konrad, as he dares him to do the whole time, leading to another scene in which the Delta operative finally executes his initial mission: to radio for the immediate evacuation of Dubai.

After the end credits, we have three new options to end the story. Walker is sitting outside a Dubai building, dressed in Konrad's uniform. When Walker is met by a couple of U.S. soldiers, probably part of the evacuation force he requested earlier, he can choose to surrender to them or to fight them (1). If he surrenders, Walker is escorted to an unknown location (2). If Walker engages his fellow soldiers, as he has done the whole game, and wins the ensuing fight, he is seen talking into a radio the same words he uttered at the beginning of the game: 'Gentlemen, welcome to Dubai' (3). If he loses, he dies.

Let us revisit the ending and take it apart for more detail. During the final chapter of the game ('Welcome,' a reference to Walker's 'Welcome to Dubai, gentlemen'), Walker finally meets Konrad, only to find out the real colonel already died days before by his own hand, rendering the Konrad with whom Walker has been speaking throughout the game as nothing more than an externalized manifestation of Walker's guilt: he needed a scapegoat to morally justify his own atrocities. As Konrad says to Walker: 'I assure you. I am as sane as you are, Captain,' which actually means that Konrad is just as insane as Walker is. What started as a simple reconnaissance mission evolved into the finding of the 33rd Battalion, the rescue of civilians, and finally the destruction of both 'The Damned' and Konrad. As Konrad summarizes – or actually as Walker does to himself – in Chapter 13 ('Adams'):

> There were over 5,000 people alive in Dubai, the day before you arrived. How many are alive today, I wonder? How many will be alive tomorrow? I thought my duty was to protect this city from the storm. I was wrong. I have to protect it from you.

The game also appears to be self-aware regarding this point. When Walker says 'I am done playing games,' the colonel answers mysteriously 'I assure you, this is no game.' Yet, it is simultaneously a game and not a game. *Spec Ops: The Line* is by all means and purposes a game, but the war portrayed in it is most certainly not. At an earlier point in the game, this theme is already raised. When Walker tries to take over the 33rd Battalion's base on top of a skyscraper by killing everyone defending it, Radio-Man taunts Walker by saying: 'Aw jeez … Where's all this violence coming from, man? Is it the video games? I bet it's the video games.' This is just another example of

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the game complicating the combination of violence and games. And again, in Loading Screen #097: 'The U.S. military does not condone the killing of unarmed combatants. But this isn't real, so why should you care?'

In this light, the different endings the text-internal player has at its disposal receive their deeper meaning. If Konrad is nothing but an externalization of Walker's guilt, Walker's killing of Konrad is effectually indicating that Walker – and at the same time the text-internal player – takes responsibility for his actions. That is why in the next scene, Walker is heard asking for the long-overdue evacuation of Dubai. In the same light, Walker shooting himself, or rather his reflection on allowing Konrad to shoot him, all points to escaping from Walker's/the text-internal player's responsibility. Walker follows in the footsteps of the real Konrad: committing suicide because neither of them can live with their guilt.

In the 'Epilogue' following the text-internal player's choice to shoot Konrad, the three options can now also be understood. Walker, allowing himself to be evacuated by soldiers, indicates his return home. However, Walker knows – as the text-internal player also does – that he cannot really go home: he will always remain in Dubai, that is, connected to the atrocities he committed. He will be mentally unhinged for the rest of his life, as so many real-life soldiers are when they return from the front. When one of the soldiers asks Walker 'What was it like? How did you survive all this?,' he replies with 'Who said I did?'

This impossibility to, in the end, leave the war is also illustrated when Walker chooses to engage the soldiers and be killed by them. In a *monologue intérieur*, Walker relives a conversation he had with the real Konrad back in Afghanistan. Walker:

> Remember back in Kabul, John? Before things got bad? We were talking. About nothing, really. I said something about going home and you… You said: 'Home? We cannot go home. There is a line men like us have to cross. If we are lucky, we do what is necessary and then we die. No. All I really want, Captain, is peace.'

Even though the endings provide freedom to choose from different scenarios, in all of them Walker dies, either actually and physically, or mentally. It is like when Loading Screen #108 tells the player: 'You can't go home.' Walker and Konrad both develop PTSD, a common mental affliction befalling soldiers on active duty. An in-game collectible called 'Konrad's Psych Profile (by Jeff Riggs),' found at Level 10 ('Riggs'), defines PTSD as: 'In an individual as accomplished as Konrad, PTSD could manifest as a pronounced tendency toward ego-mania and calcification of moral certitude.' The same, the game suggests, applies to both Walker *and* the text-internal player.

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6 Breaking the Player

Complex Modes of Communication

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The game *Spec Ops: The Line* utilizes some very interesting but highly complex modes of communication, including (a) an intentional conjuring up of ludo-narrative dissonance, (b) the breaking of the fourth wall, and (c) placing considerable stress on the entanglement between the player's avatar and the text-internal player, and on the identification between this avatar and the text-external player.

Intentional Ludo-Narrative Dissonance

As explained earlier (see Chapter 1), ludo-narrative dissonance is caused when a game's mechanics stimulates a player to do a certain thing (kill enemies, rob people, betray an ally), while its narrative urges that same player to do the opposite (spare enemies, leave people alone, be faithful to your allies). Usually, such dissonance is not only bothersome to the invested (text-external) player – the text-internal player will not 'mind' such dissonance – but is also a kind of 'development accident' on the part of the text-external authors of the game, the developing team. Generally speaking, developers want the ludic and narrative portions of their games to be in synchronicity, clicking into one another like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. And when players experience that the pieces do not fit very well, this can be a certain source of complaint and criticism toward the game and its creators. Of course, some text-external players of a game suffering from such dissonance might not even experience it – or care if they do; but smart and invested players do. However, *Spec Ops: The Line* does not only *have* ludo-narrative dissonance, but has it *purposefully* designed into the game, both on the level of its text-external author as well as on its text-internal one. Let us examine the various moments this dissonance occurs to see how this ties in with the game's greater scope.

The first dissonance, and quite a repeated one at that, is the execution of enemies. Players can command Walker to execute downed enemies in increasingly more violent ways. Executing enemies will give Walker/the player more ammo, a commodity that is rather scarce in this game, especially

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on higher difficulty levels. Ludo-strategically operating players will probably prioritize an execution over a 'normal' kill because the extra ammo optimizes their chance of winning the game, while, on the other hand, narrative-ethically operating players will do the opposite, since the increasing brutality of the execution collides with the standard military practices deemed honorable among modern state armies. Intriguingly enough, the game also criticizes this assumption in the same breath, since it shows that honor and being civilized are rules of war that are only affordable for those who spend their time in safety far away from the battlefront vis-à-vis the men and women who are doing the actual fighting and have to live with the moral ambiguity of the conflict, their enemies' tactics, and their own conscience. Both the novel *Heart of Darkness* and the film *Apocalypse Now* feature this commentary (see Chapter 5).

Even more so, the game stops at nothing to stimulate or even force the text-internal (and text-external) player to behave violently, just like a protagonist is of course supposed to do in any standard third-person shooter or military simulation game. In this sense, *Spec Ops: The Line* is not very different from other war simulators-cum-first-person shooters that it takes its inspiration from: fast-paced action, the conflict between a lonely highly-individualized (Western) hero versus a horde of unknown, anonymous (non-Western) enemies, the obligatory but uninspired killing, and so forth. At the same time, however, the game's text-internal author scorns the text-internal and text-external player for doing what it is evidently and effectively stimulating them to do.

It is especially the Loading Screens that become increasingly judgmental when the player enters the second half of the game. To give some examples:

> You are still a good person.
> There is no escape.
> If Lugo were still alive, he would likely suffer from PTSD.
> So, really, he's the lucky one.
> This is all your fault.
> Do you feel like a hero yet?
> How many Americans have you killed today?
> If you were a better person, you wouldn't be here.
> To kill for yourself is murder.
> To kill for your government is heroic.
> To kill for entertainment is harmless.
> Kill a man, and you are a murderer.
> Kill everyone, and you are a god.[1]

Loading Screens are not game over screens. They can be avoided by a very good text-external player who just never dies during the course of his or her

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playthrough, or by the text-internal player – since what we commonly refer to as 'dying' in a game is ludically speaking a feedback mechanism by the game indicating that the player has failed to deliver the correct set of inputs to arrive at the end of a level; theoretically, a text-internal player is a perfect player, so correctional feedback by the game system to improve its performance is not necessary.[2]

However, if one wants to finish the game, Loading Screens can never be avoided by any internal or external player. There is the theoretical possibility of a text-external player avoiding all or some of these Loading Screens by just quitting the game altogether. Statements like 'You are still a good person' and 'Do you feel like a hero yet?' challenge the player's ethical perception of its actions, implying that the pursuit of heroism has led down a dark, morally ambiguous path. Other messages, such as 'This is all your fault' and 'How many Americans have you killed today?' further suggest that players are personally responsible for the violence in the game. Finally, philosophical contrasts like 'To kill for yourself is murder' versus 'To kill for your government is heroic' question the justifications for violence in wartime contexts.

A third 'moment' at which *Spec Ops: The Line*'s ludo-narrative dissonance is present is in its morality system, which is – as we have established in Chapter 5 – kind of fake. The game seems to offer multiple moral choices within the game, understood as such by at least the text-internal player, but also by any individual text-external player who is even remotely familiar with how morality is dealt with in modern video games. However, the options the player chooses in any of these instances have no influence on either the game mechanics or the development of the game's story; not even in one instance does the game refer back to a specific choice the player has made earlier. And when the game does refer back – as it does on various occasions – it does so regarding elements in the game's story that are solidified and cannot be changed by anything the player can do.

The only real choice Walker has, as a character under the direction of the text-internal author, is to continue to push on forward with his mission, which is doomed to fail from the onset, as he becomes increasingly aware of. The only choice the text-internal player of the game has, as it is also under the control of the text-internal author (even though with more room for its own input than a character, see Chapter 1), is much the same: it must continue playing the game to its completion, independent of the actual effectiveness of the morality system and the reality of the consequences of its moral choices within this imposed system. The text-internal player can only 'read' the game as it is intended to be by its text-internal author. The text-external player, however, has much more freedom, as he or she always has per definition. The text-external player, a person of flesh and blood sitting behind a pc or console, has the freedom to end the game: that is, to shrug off the text-external author's control over him or her in as far as he or she identifies with the text-internal player and thereby is entangled with his or her in-game avatar. It is

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just like one of the Loading Screens reads: 'If you were a better person, you wouldn't be here.' But it is only the text-external reader of the game who has this amount of liberty.

Breaking of the Fourth Wall

During Walker's sojourn in storm-ridden Dubai, a mysterious male voice taunts the Delta Force team via the local radio station. This 'Radio-Man' is actually Robert Darden, a former journalist who joined John Konrad's rogue 33rd Battalion. In Darden, we get a glimpse of the real-life journalist Evan Wright, who was embedded in the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion of the United States Marine Corps during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, leading to the publication of the book *Generation Kill* (2004; see Chapter 5). Through his broadcasts, he adds a surreal, almost mocking layer to the violent events happening around them. To give some examples:

> Who goes around bashing people's heads in?
> With a gun, no less!
> It's unnecessary and impractical!
> That guy? You shot that guy? I liked that guy! Awww, he only had two more days until retirement. He had a… dog… maybe? I didn't really know that guy. He had a wife and kids. Won't someone please think of the children?
> Aw jeez… Where's all this violence coming from, man?
> Is it the video games? I bet it's the video games.

The first is a reference to the aforementioned (see above) execution-kill that the player can let Walker perform on downed enemies, providing extra ammo but at the cost of brutality and unnecessary violence against an already defeated enemy. The second is when Walker kills two unsuspecting soldiers from the rogue 33rd Battalion, who were – quite audibly so to Walker and the (text-internal) player – discussing their private lives back home. It is one of the few instances that Walker's adversaries receive a personality of their own, only to then be mercilessly killed by Walker/the player.

The third time, Darden breaks the 'fourth wall,' a feature commonly associated with concepts like metafiction or self-conscious/self-aware films and games like *Undertale* (2015) or *The Beginner's Guide* (2015).[3] From a communication-oriented perspective, the breaking of the fourth wall is only one of three ways in which the text-internal author can communicate with the text-internal reader (see Figure 6.1).

The first and most common way is indirect: the text-internal author communicates to the text-internal reader through the characters on the textual stage. The second way is direct: the text-internal author directly addresses the

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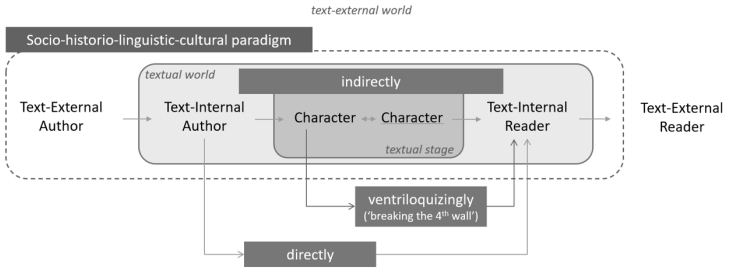

Figure 6.1 The three possible ways of communication between the text-external author and the text-internal reader according to the Communication-Oriented Method of Text Analysis.

text-internal reader. For example: 'Dear reader, I want to tell you something about what happened years ago in Maine…' The third possible way of communication is ventriloquizing: the text-internal author uses the 'voice' of one of the characters on the textual stage to communicate with the text-internal reader. This ventriloquizing character breaks the fourth wall: it reveals that it has more information than it should have in view of its narrative position.

This is what happens in the third quotation from Radio-Man: 'Where's all this violence coming from, man? Is it the video games? I bet it's the video games.' On the one hand, this is one character (Darden) talking to another character (Walker, addressed as 'man') about the violent nature of video games and suggesting a causal relationship between playing violent video games and violence committed in the real-life world; a causality frequently but never satisfactorily argued for in popular culture and media (see Chapter 7 for a more in-depth analysis).

On the other hand, the video game remark is simultaneously directed by the text-internal author to the text-internal reader through the voice of the Darden character. This ventriloquizing character, Radio-Man, is asking the important question: who is the one orchestrating (and therefore responsible for) all the violence in the game? We have five candidates:

(1) The character Walker is orchestrating the violence. On the level of the textual stage, it is Walker who is actually shooting and killing not only Dubai insurgents, but also fellow American soldiers and – in the phosphorus scene – innocent civilians including women and children. Walker claims time and time again that he did not have a choice. This is true, even though Walker cannot know this: Walker cannot decide to do anything by himself, because on the higher communicative level, it is the text-internal player of the game controlling him (of course in as far as this is allowed and afforded by the text-internal author). Secondly, the moral choices offered to Walker are not really choices: the game always continues in a direction already decided by the text-internal author.

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(2) The text-internal author is orchestrating the violence in *Spec Ops: The Line* – an obvious choice since the text-internal author is in absolute control of everything that is happening in the game, including the amount of freedom given to the text-internal player to choose its own path through the game's story and world. (3) At the same time, one could argue that it is the text-internal player who is responsible for the violence in Dubai, since it is the one that is entangled with its avatar and gives all the necessary inputs that propel Walker through the game. It thinks it has been given some moral choices regarding the steering of the game's narrative, and it bases its inputs on that. However, the choices are pseudo in nature, burdening the text-internal player with the impression of bearing responsibility even if free choice is not offered in the first place.

(4) One could also argue that the text-external author – the game's developing team from Yager – is the one that is orchestrating the violence by designing the game as it is, including everything we have discussed earlier. (5) But on the other hand, it is individual text-external players who eventually decide to engage in the game's mechanics and story, 'choosing' moral options that lead to even more violence. This text-external player is the only one with a real 'choice': he or she can choose to quit the game and thus stop the violence and stop his or her in-game responsibility for it.

This very complex question – who is responsible for Walker committing atrocities including the phosphorus attack? – brought forth by – among other things – the intentional occurrence of multiple ludo-narrative dissonances and fourth-wall-breaking monologues, leads to two kinds of communication tension: the entanglement between the text-internal player and its in-game avatar *and* the identification between the text-internal and the text-external player.

Tensions in Entanglement and Identification

Generally, in video games, as a specific medium, the entanglement between the text-internal player and its in-game avatar is self-explanatory and absolute in nature (see Chapter 1). The story of the game is told by the text-internal author *to* the text-internal reader (as is usual in any communication/text), *about* the text-internal reader (as far as it is entangled with its avatar), and also *by* the text-internal reader (as far as it is allowed to do so within the boundaries set by the text-internal author). Usually, there is no strain or tension regarding this entanglement: it just exists. The text-internal player uses its avatar to interact with the world. This is a two-way flow: the player has influence on the game world, and the world reacts and responds to the player through what happens with and to the avatar.

A text-external player can – as a 'bonus' – also develop a psychological or emotional connection with his or her avatar. Think about the many times that player will exclaim 'OMG, I died again!' instead of – for example – 'OMG, Walker died again!' The more an individual player identifies himself or herself

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with their avatar, the stronger the connection between the two becomes. The feeling of connectedness between player and avatar stems from the fact that the former has control over the latter; and control stimulates responsibility. Interestingly enough, the identification does *not* rest upon physical or gender similarities per se.[4] The difference is that a text-external player has a choice to identify himself or herself with their avatars, while the text-internal player does not have a choice regarding its entanglement with its avatar: it simply exists because of the specific medium of video games as digitally mediated ludo-narrative texts.

However, in the case of *Spec Ops: The Line*, not only is the identification between the text-external player and the avatar intentionally jeopardized (by the text-external authors in this case), but also the entanglement between the text-internal player and its avatar (by the text-internal author in this case). To start with the second, the entanglement between the text-internal player and its avatar is put under a lot of stress through the nature of the moral choices seemingly offered by the game (as explored in Chapter 5b 'Moral [Pseudo] Choices').

The character-avatar Walker is presented with a couple of choices (we have discussed these in detail in another previous section) that have no significant ludic or narrative consequences for the game in the long run. On the level of the character, these choices are genuine ones, just like all choices made by characters in any text are, in the sense that the outcome of the choice is predetermined by the text-internal author. Harry Potter or Luke Skywalker do not really have choices about what to do or not to do: from the perspective of the textual world, the characters on the textual stage do what they are told to do by the text-internal author.

In the case of the medium of video games, as digitally mediated ludo-narrative texts, real choices can, however, be made on the level of the text-internal player, at least insofar as they are options within the boundaries set by the text-internal author. If the game (the text-internal author) offers a choice to the text-internal player, the former offers a limited number of possibilities to the latter (of course related to the text-external authors' and players' technical limitations depending on the available hardware and software). The choices offered to the text-internal player are, however, only pseudo in nature: they are not real choices; they only appear to be so.

The dissonance (to employ a notion we have already used regarding the slightly different context of ludo-narrative dissonance) between the character-avatar Walker and its entangled text-internal player is caused by the differences in actual freedom they possess. This given freedom is possessed by Walker due to communication necessity, while the player possesses this freedom only in appearance. Walker 'chooses' to continue with his increasingly violent rampage in Dubai, while the pseudo-choices of the entangled player have no influence on the game. The text-internal player is 'sucked into' the violence that it is supposed to have chosen, but in actual fact it is forced to do

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so by the game itself. It articulates choice to the player, while withholding its core benefits: being able to co-author the story as the text-internal player does under the direction of the text-internal author.

This puts immense stress upon the entanglement between the text-internal player and its character-avatar, and this has serious ramifications for the identification between the text-external player and the character-avatar. As in all cases, the text-external player of any given text has a kind of freedom no text-internal entity has: that is, to quit reading the text or, in our case, playing the game (something the game seems to promote in its breaking of the fourth wall, as discussed earlier on in this chapter). Neither the text-internal player nor any character of any text has this kind of 'absolute' luxury. A text-external player can choose to stop playing, while the text-internal player *and* the characters on the textual stage are 'doomed' to live out the story of their texts. In a certain sense, both are 'trapped' in the text from which they cannot escape, neither practically nor theoretically.

The text-external player of *Spec Ops: The Line* – the only one with an actual choice in the whole game – is (very likely) emotionally attached to its character-avatar Walker through his or her identification with the text-internal player. If game-external players dislike or even hate a specific game, this identification has failed for one reason or another (which tend to be very subjective), while a player who loves a particular game has succeeded – most often unconsciously – in this identification. This text-external player, just like his or her text-internal counterpart, is suggested to have a reasonable amount of choice within the game regarding engagement or disengagement with the violence surrounding Walker in Dubai.

However, whatever both the text-external and text-internal player may choose in any given situation in *Spec Ops: The Line*, the net end result is an increasingly violent descent into madness and barbarism. Individual (text-external) players have reported unease with the game (some of them are mentioned in the Introduction). Curtis Silver described the game as imbuing 'severe psychological trauma to the main character.'[5] On Reddit, user Rocketman0739 reported he felt 'dirty' after finishing the game.[6] Also on Reddit, user Zerms4 wrote that the game made him feel 'horrible.'[7] User AceStudios10 added: 'I only recently finished *Spec Ops: The Line*. It made me feel like a terrible person.'[8] And user Omnomabamini pointed out: 'When I first played it and got to That Part (you know the one) [the phosphorus scene], I had to stop playing for a good six hours. I'd never had a game hit me like that, and never since.'[9]

Because of the suggestion of choice given to text-external players, the emotional responsibility of these players over their avatar's actions is even increased. Walker's death spiral is, at least partially, thanks to the choices the players have made up until that point. This emotional identification causes the things that Walker does and that are done to Walker to be experienced by the

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text-external players as happening because of them: they are the true reason for the Dubai atrocities in general and for the phosphorus attack specifically (since this is the scene that *always* crops up when players discuss their experiences with this game).

Spec Ops: The Line puts stress on the connections between avatar, text-internal player, and text-external player, causing an inverted game communication in which the genre's characteristic co-authorship of the text-internal author is hampered while suggesting precisely the opposite. The only way of 'winning' the game – that is *not* to spiral downwards into violence and madness – is by refusing to play it altogether, an option only available to the text-external player, while the character-avatar Walker *and* the text-internal player are – as the endings of the game all suggest – stuck in the Dubai madhouse. The only one who can 'go home' is the text-external player; Walker and the internal player stay in Dubai indefinitely without any possibility of escape.

Notes

1 Loading Screens #093, #095, #098, #101, #102, #103, #105, #106, and #109.
2 Frank G. Bosman, 'Death Narratives. A Typology of Narratological Embeddings of Player's Death in Digital Games,' *Gamenvironments* 9 (2018), 12–52.
3 Tom Brown, *Breaking the Fourth Wall. Direct Address in the Cinema*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (2012); Larry McCaffery, 'The Art of Metafiction,' in: Mark Currie (ed.), *Metafiction,* London: Routledge (1995) 181–193.
4 Dong Dong Li, Albert Klein Liau, and Angeline Khoo, 'Player-Avatar Identification in Video Games. Concept and Measurement,' *Computers in Human Behavior* 29/1 (2013), 257–263; Nicholas Bowman and Jaime Banks, 'Player-Avatar Identification, Relationships, and Interaction. Entertainment through Asocial, Parasocial, and Fully Social Processes,' in: Peter Vorderer and Christoph Klimmt (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Entertainment Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2021), 690–716.
5 Silver, 'The Darkness.'
6 Rocketman0739, 'I Just Finished Spec Ops.'
7 Zerms4, 'Just Finish Spec Ops.'
8 AceStudios10, 'I Only Recently Finished Spec Ops: The Line. It Made Me Feel Like a Terrible Person,' *Reddit*, July 4, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/gaming/comments/4r4652/i_only_recently_finished_spec_ops_the_line_it [visited November 7, 2024].
9 Omnomabamini in: IAmTarkaDaal, 'Playing Spec Ops: The Line in 2022,' *Reddit*, February 22, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/patientgamers/comments/sxv6n1/comment/hxwu7j9 visited November 7, 2024].

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Rocketman0739. 'I Just Finished *Spec Ops: The Line. I Feel Dirty...* (spoilers)'. *Reddit*, February 2, 2014. https://www.reddit.com/r/truegaming/comments/1wsvke/i_just_finished_spec_ops_the_line_i_feel_dirty [visited March 8, 2024].

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Zerms4. 'Just Finish *Spec Ops: The Line, Never a Video Game Made Me Feel Guilty of My Actions in It till this Game Happen*'. *Reddit*, September 16, 2014. https://www.reddit.com/r/gaming/comments/2gl6rs/just_finish_spec_ops_the_line_never_a_video_game [visited March 8, 2024].

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7 Berating the Player

The Game's Self-Criticism

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Spec Ops: The Line is very critical of its own genre and of its own playing, specifically criticizing the gratuity of violence in first-person shooters–cum–war simulators, the binary nature of in-game morality systems, and the false self-explanatory nature of in-game villains. I will address all three individually below.

Make War, Not Love

The title screen of *Spec Ops: The Line* is a dynamic one: it shows a different version, depending on the player's progression through the game's story. There are six versions of the title screen, all depicting a rocky plateau-cum-vantage point looking over the Dubai skyline (see Figure 7.1). Amidst lower buildings and desert surroundings, a massive building is in the middle of being constructed: the in-game version of Dubai's Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest structure (829.8 meters). The in-game version is still surrounded by scaffolding with cranes still attached to the structure, making it clear that it is still under construction. The iconic antenna on top of the Burj Khalifa is also still missing. Due to the catastrophe hitting the game's Dubai, the construction has been halted indefinitely.

The first two versions – beginning, day (top left) and night (top right) – show a soldier of unknown affiliation. He (there are no female soldiers in *Spec Ops: The Line*) wears a facemask as found in desert environments: protection from the sand in the daytime and from the cold at night. He is armed with a rifle that clearly shows signs of having been provisionally repaired, apparently by the soldier himself. Above him, an American flag is waving. It is, however, both torn – probably by wear and tear – and upside down, with the blue-and-white star pattern in the left lower corner. The reversal of the flag could be an indication that the soldier is not American, his action being a protest against the American intervention in Dubai. This is, however, less likely, since a non-American combatant would have removed the flag altogether. It is, therefore, much more likely that the soldier is an American one,

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Figure 7.1 The changing title screen of *Spec Ops: The Line*. Credit of the composition: https://i.redd.it/ge97v5qd5z661.png.

Credit of the images: Yager Development/2K.

who purposefully reversed his nation's flag. The reasons for this reversal are still not explicit, but given the war-critical stance of *Spec Ops: The Line* it can be argued that it was done by the unnamed American soldier to protest against his own country. It is perhaps tempting to see Walker in the figure of the lonely soldier below the reversed flag, but nowhere in the game is Walker shown to be sitting atop such a vantage point. The only difference between the day and night is a little campfire keeping the soldier warm at night.

The second two versions – middle, day (left) and dusk (right) – show the same soldier, but he is now in an alert position. Earlier, he was sitting relaxedly; now he is lying flat on his stomach, looking into the distance through the scope of his rifle, apparently ready to shoot. In the other version, the soldier is gone. The sun is setting behind the tattered flag and smoke is rising from the top of the Burj Khalifa. In the context of the story, this indicates that the soldier – once only observing, then on the defensive – is now in fact interfering in the Dubai situation, drawn into a conflict he initially wanted to avoid. And the result is already ominously clear: the total destruction of Dubai is foreshadowed by the smoke arising from the tower in the distance.

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The third two versions – end, night (left) and dawn (right) – show the soldier again, but by the look of the blood under his body he is now clearly dead, violently killed. Two birds of prey are sitting on the dead man, picking at his corpse. The image of birds of prey picking at a human corpse is a classic *topos* in Western cinema and video gaming, invariably used to indicate the violent death of the individual in question. The film *Apocalypse Now*, one of the prime sources of inspiration for *Spec Ops: The Line*, features many scenes where scavenging birds linger near corpses, symbolizing the futility and inhumanity of war, as well as nature's role in erasing human traces. In the meantime, we see the top of the Burj Khalifa on fire, as well as several other buildings in the surroundings of the tower, symbolizing the destruction that is rapidly spreading through the area. In the other version, the soldier's corpse is gone – either completely consumed by wildlife or removed by his comrades. The American flag has come down and is wrapped over the debris. Through the dust clouds, we see several buildings, among them the Burj Khalifa, destroyed, with only their skeletons to remind people of their former glory.

The title screens of *Spec Ops: The Line* are a very concise summary of both the game's story and its stance on violence and war. Through the game's complicated communications (see the previous chapter), the game signals to its players the reality of real-life war and conflict – the inspiration sources for the game's genre of war simulators-cum-first-person shooters. In concrete, real-life situations of war, there are horror and violence, which not everyone is lucky enough to escape. Some may never escape physically, stranded in besieged territory, or killed by soldiers, diseases, or famine; others may be able to flee physically, but remain traumatized for the rest of their lives, never being able to leave the war psychologically. This turns the game into its opposite: an anti-war game disguised as a war shooter.

In Chapter 4, I defined four aspects of an anti-war video game and suggested all four were applicable to *Spec Ops: The Line*. After my lengthy discussion of the game, I now return to see if my suggestion is viable in the long run. *Spec Ops: The Line* does indeed focus on the moral complexities and devastating consequences of conflict rather than glorifying combat. The opposite is even true for the game: the longer the shooting continues, the less appealing it becomes, precisely because both the text-internal and text-external players are confronted with the less glorious aspects of armed conflict, in which they notably play their own decisive part. The interactive nature of games is the cause of this.

Spec Ops: The Line focuses on the personal dimension of war and conflict, prioritizing individual human experiences and emphasizing the emotional toll of war rather than solely focusing on anonymized action or strategy. The game is one long and winding road into madness and insanity, in which players are both the cause and the victim of their own and others' violent actions. The game hones in on Walker's descent into madness, but through Walker also that of the (text-internal) player, who is responsible for Walker's in-game

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decisions. The violence is right in front of Walker/the player, with his/its actions having concrete consequences: pain, blood, and suffering.

Most anti-war games present players with difficult moral choices, often forcing them to confront the ethical complexities of war. It is in this area that *Spec Ops: The Line* really shines. Through its maze of pseudo-choices (see Chapters 5 and 6), the (text-internal) player is placed in a position that highlights its moral responsibility for the violence happening to and caused by Walker, but at the same time, the game takes real choice and responsibility away from Walker/the player, since the former is under the control of the latter and because no real choices are offered in the first place. This describes war and conflict as a self-propelling phenomenon, in which individual choices seem to exist (including moral responsibility) while in truth, the 'rules of the game' prevent any real possibility of changing the course of the conflict, let alone ending it.

And finally, anti-war games move away from the traditional portrayal of soldiers as heroic figures, instead depicting them as vulnerable, flawed, or manipulated. Again, this is an aspect in which *Spec Ops: The Line* really flourishes. Just before Walker's iconic 'Welcome to Dubai' moment at the very beginning of the Dubai mission, the first conversation between Walker, Lugo, and Adams is a typical military joke about one of them having sand in their underpants.

Lugo: Hey Cap. Captain Walker.
Walker: What is it, Lugo.
Lugo: Gotta situation, sir.
Walker: Mission critical?
Lugo: No, sir.
Walker: Then take it up the chain [of command], sergeant.
Lugo: [to Walker] Roger that. [to Adams] Lieutenant Adams?
Adams:I hear ya, Sergeant. What's your status?
Lugo: Status is chafed, sir!
Adams:You say chafed, sergeant?
Lugo: Yes, sir. A local airborne insurgence has infiltrated the US zone designated as my pants. Sir.
Adams:[laughing] Shut up, jackass.
Walker: Gentlemen, welcome to Dubai.

The light-heartedness of this pleasantry is contrasted starkly with the last conversation between Walker and Adams. They are pinned down by Konrad's forces and are asked to surrender. Walker seems to want to accept, for it is perhaps the only means of reaching the enemy's HQ. Lugo, on the other hand, is very much not willing to surrender.

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Adams: Don't you dare to surrender. (…) I didn't come this far to surrender.
Walker: It is the only way into that tower.
Adams: For fuck's sake, give it up! The mission is over! We failed!
Walker: Not while I'm still breathing.
Adams: Fine, then keep breathing.

Adams pushes Walker over the edge of their hideout, drawing all the fire toward himself. The result is Walker being able to reach Konrad's HQ, but Adams is dead. The three soldiers started the mission self-confidently and were sure that the mission would not be a problem to tackle, joking among one another about sand in their underpants. Later, at the end of the mission, Adams and Walker discuss the catastrophic nature of the mission and its apparent ending in failure. There is no longer room for joking around. Instead, Adams sacrifices himself for Walker in a desperate attempt to complete this near-impossible mission. The game depicts everybody involved in the conflict as literal losers: they lose their home, their families, their friends, their values, their mores, their lives, and their mental sanity. War has no winners, only losers.

Life Never Is That Simple

The game criticizes in-game morality systems by implementing a false one. I have discussed this extensively in Chapters 5 and 6, so I will refrain from repeating these findings here at any length. As discussed, standard in-game morality systems feature a number of recurrent problems. Morality systems suggest a binary nature of morality, the possibility of an ideal solution, and a strong connection between ludic and narrative elements, while in reality these systems can be manipulated by a (text-external) player and do not reflect how morality plays out practically in the vast grayness of contingent everyday life.

Spec Ops: The Line chose not to improve its in-game morality system to overcome these criticisms – probably having failed (partially) in the process – but doubled down on the system's inherent flaws. It presents the player with moral choices that are – as we have established earlier – not real choices at all. Instead of addressing the complexity of moral everyday living vis-à-vis an in-game version of a system that would be able to simulate that complexity, the game reverses into developing a system that demonstrates how often people do not have a choice at all, or at least, that people have the impression that they never have any real opportunity to actualize their free will.

The events of *Spec Ops: The Line* end in utter violence and madness, but the road toward that violence and madness is not paved with determined, specified, well-thought-out, explicitly contemplated moral decisions by either the game's characters or the (text-internal) player. Every choice that either Walker or the player makes in the game is more or less a logical result of

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previous ones, leading into an increasingly narrower corridor of possibilities, until these all run out. The game illustrates not so much the complexity of everyday moral decision-making, but rather its absence, leading an individual down a pathway he or she never consciously decided for or against.

Self-Explanatory Adversaries

Video games, films, and other media feature various self-explanatory adversaries. These adversaries do not need lengthy or complex background stories or motivation arcs in order to be understood by the general audience as 'just evil.'[1] Since the Second World War, the Western world has at least five groups of such easy villains. The first group is the Russians, especially in the context of the Cold War, framed as the ideological 'other' to Western democracies, particularly the United States. Russians have often been portrayed as spies, soldiers, or ruthless agents. See, for example, *Rocky IV* (1985), *The Hunt for Red October* (1990), *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), or the *Red Alert* series (1996–present). Arabs, especially post-9/11 and often unproblematically equated to Muslims, and vice versa, are usually portrayed as unreliable, religion-fueled terrorists, with whom no negotiation needs to or can take place.[2] The other three groups are Nazis, zombies, and aliens.[3]

The Dubai setting of *Spec Ops: The Line* would be ideal for a stereotypical depiction of Arabs, but the game refrains from falling for this. The game depicts the local citizens as the victims of the violence or as insurgents who understandably fight against the 'foreign' 33rd Damned Battalion. Most of the violence is perpetrated by different factions of Americans: the 33rd Damned Battalion, the Exiles, the CIA, and Delta Force. Lugo, Adams, and Walker frequently discuss the issue of Americans shooting other Americans, something that runs diametrically against their morality. Nowhere does the game equate Arabs with Muslims or Americans with Christians.

Notes

1 Frank Bosman, 'Fittingly Violent. Narrative Properties of Violence in Digital Games,' in: Leonardo Marcato and Felix Schniz (eds.), *Fictional Practices of Spirituality. Interactive Media*, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag (2023), 239–262 (244–245).

2 Vit Šisler, 'Digital Arabs. Representation in Video Games,' *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11/2 (2008), 203–220; Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs. How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, updated version, Northampton: Olive Branch Press (2009).

3 Frank Bosman, 'Aliens in Video Games as "The Other". The Cases of *Half-Life* and *Prey*,' in: Frank Bosman, Mathilde van Dijk, and Kjelda Glimmerveen (eds.), *Aliens and Humans in Contemporary Science Fiction*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming.

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8 *The Burning Madonna*
Theological Ramifications

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Spec Ops: The Line is not known for its engagement with religion; however, the game invokes theological themes by connecting three different images of the Madonna and Child, a very well-known image within Christian iconography: the mother-and-child killed by Walker's phosphorus attack, Konrad's painted rendering of the scene inside his office, and Raphael's world-famous *TheSistine Madonna*. These intratextual and intertextual relationships imbue the whole game with religious overtones, especially in terms of liberation theology.

The Question of the Three Madonnas

The 'phosphorus scene,' as described and analyzed in the previous chapters, is key to understanding the dominant messages that the game presents to its players. The suggestion of choice, coupled with the absence of any *real* choice in a ludic or narrative sense, has antagonized text-external readers, who express their horror at committing – through their identification with the text-internal reader and through its entanglement with its character-avatar – war crimes for all the wrong reasons: the soldiers who Walker/the player is shooting at are actually helping to evacuate the citizens instead of rounding them up for execution, *and* the phosphorus attack kills not only the 'enemy' soldiers but also the citizens they were protecting, in the most horrifying way imaginable, by burning them to death.

The scene is epitomized at its ending, when Lugo and Adams – Walker's teammates – are discussing the morality of the situation, especially the question as to whether they had any choice or not in firing the phosphorus mortar (and about who is to blame for the whole situation). I repeat the conversation again:

Lugo: This is your fault, goddammit.
Adams: Stop right there, Lugo.

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Lugo: But it is. He wouldn't listen!
Adams: We didn't have a choice!
Lugo: He turned us into fucking killers!
Adams: That's enough, Sergeant!
Lugo: No! NO!!!
Adams: Control yourself! Now!
Walker: We need to keep moving. (…)
Adams: But, Walker… you're not… you're not even –
Walker: I'm going to make these bastards pay for what they've done. Now, are you with me or not? (…) There is nothing good about what happened out there, Lugo. But our hand was forced.

The 'he' who forced Ludo and Adams into becoming 'fucking killers' is ambiguous and can relate to various communication entities: (1) the character Walker, who – as their commanding officer – ordered them to prepare and fire the phosphorus ammunition; (2) the text-internal author, which directed the game's story in such a way that no alternative was given to the text-internal player ('we need to keep moving'), while leaving no other alternative for the text-external player than to quit the game entirely; (3) the text-internal player, which directs the actions of Walker in the first place, thus manipulating Lugo and Adams; and (4) the text-external player, who is actually pushing the buttons of the game. Correspondingly, the 'bastards' who 'forced our hand' is also ambiguous: it can relate to Konrad or – again – to the text-internal author, the text-internal player, or the text-external player.

During this discussion, we zoom in on Walker's face and eyes, while the words of his comrades are fading away. Walker's eyes – and therefore also those of the (text-internal) player – are fixed on a pile of burned human remains, civilians who were killed by the phosphorus attack. In the background, we see a dark fence, suggesting more a situation of imprisonment than of protection: the civilians could not have escaped the inferno, even if they had known what was imminently in store for them. In the midst of this already horrifying scene, we see two charred and decomposing human figures sitting on the ground, embracing one another (see Figure 8.1, top left). The larger figure (on the left) appears to be an adult, cradling a smaller figure (on the right), likely a child. The adult figure's face is heavily burned, with darkened and blistered skin, and parts of the skull are exposed. Its arms are wrapped protectively around the child, whose body and face are similarly charred. The left hand of the adult figure holds his or her hand over the child's eyes, protecting it from the horror surrounding it, but also shielding it from the eyes of the (text-internal) player.

Later in the game, near the ending (which I have already discussed in Chapter 5), the player-cum-Walker arrives at Konrad's temporary headquarters. Inside, Konrad is busy painting a rather large scene while talking to

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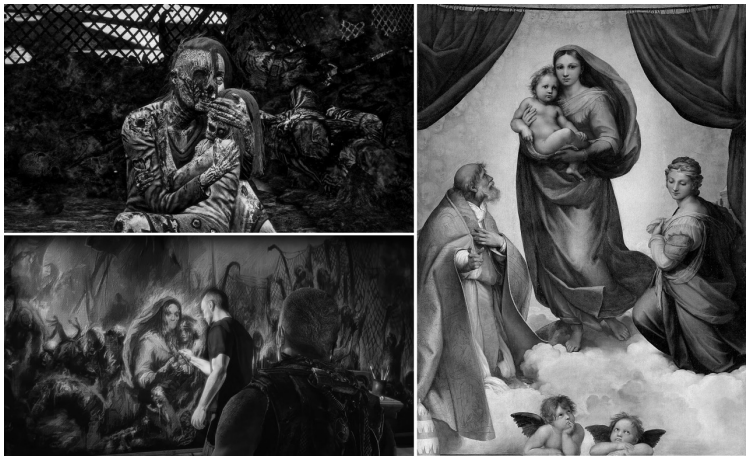

Figure 8.1 A mother-and-child burned to death in the phosphorus attack (*The Phosphorus Madonna* left top), Konrad painting a mother-and-child in his Dubai office (left bottom, *Konrad's Madonna*), and *The Sistine Madonna* by Raphael (right).

Credit for the two images on the left: Yager Development/2K.

Walker (see Figure 8.1, bottom left). Konrad's painting shows a remarkable resemblance to the earlier depiction of the mother-and-child in the aftermath of the phosphorus attack. Depicted are: a black fence (on the right), showing shadowy figures desperately, but ultimately failing, to climb over it to safety; contorted and mutilated human figures lying on top of one another; yellow flames ignited by Walker's phosphorus grenades burning at the top left corner of the painting.

In the midst of all this (and Konrad is seen in the act of finishing precisely this part of the scene), there is a mother and child. Just like the figure of the phosphorus attack, the mother figure is on the left, holding her child with her right hand. However, the mother's mouth is blotted out (perhaps by accident on the level of the textual stage, but certainly *not* on the level of the textual world). The mother's hand is on the left temple of the child, but is *not* blocking its gaze, which is directed at Walker (on the level of the textual stage) and at the text-internal player entangled with Walker (on the level of the textual world).

Both *The Phosphorus Madonna* as I dub the mother-and-child who have fallen victim to Walker's attack, and especially *Konrad's Madonna*, feature strong visual resemblances to a historical (text-external world) painting, *The Sistine Madonna* (see Figure 8.1, right side) painted by the famous Italian artist Raphael (1483–1520).[1] *The Sistine Madonna* created around 1512–1513,

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was commissioned by Pope Julius II for the church of San Sisto in Piacenza, Italy (this is why the painting is also known as the *Madonna di San Sisto*). Julius II dedicated the painting to his late uncle, Pope Sixtus IV (+1484), and it depicts a central composition dominated by the figure of Mother Mary standing on clouds, holding a young Jesus Christ. Mary, dressed in a long red robe with a blue mantle, has her head covered by a light veil. She looks directly outward with a calm expression, while her child, unclothed except for a light drape across his body, sits on her arm and gazes outward as well.

To the left of the central figures, an older male figure – Saint Sixtus II (+258) – kneels, dressed in gold and white robes, with a halo around his head. He gestures with one hand toward his chest and looks up at the woman and child. To the right, a kneeling woman, Saint Barbara (+ end 3rd century), also haloed, is positioned slightly lower than the man. She wears a colorful gown with green, yellow, and blue elements and gazes downward, her hands clasped together as if in prayer.At the bottom of the composition, two winged cherubs, known as *putti*, rest on a ledge or on the edge of the clouds. They are depicted in relaxed poses with their elbows resting and their heads on their hands, looking upward. The background is framed by large green curtains, slightly pulled back to reveal a light, neutral-toned sky behind the figures.

Sixtus II served as the Bishop of Rome from 257 until 258, when he was executed – beheaded alongside seven deacons – during the persecutions under the Roman emperor Valerian. He is venerated as a saint in both the Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church.[2] Saint Barbara is recognized by several distinctive attributes, including a tower, which is partially obscured by a green curtain on the right. According to legend, Barbara was the daughter of Dioscorus, a wealthy pagan in the 3rd century. Much like the modern tale of Rapunzel, Barbara was confined in a tower by her father. After secretly converting to Christianity and rejecting a marriage proposal arranged by her father, she was brought before a magistrate and subjected to repeated torture. However, her wounds miraculously healed each night. Torches meant to burn her extinguished as soon as she entered the room. Ultimately, she was executed by beheading, her own father acting as her executioner. As divine retribution, he was struck by lightning and consumed by fire.[3]

Barbara is the patron saint of artillerymen, military engineers (due to her association with the tower), gunsmiths, and all those working with gunpowder, as her story prominently features fire, torches, and lightning. In Spanish and Italian, her connection to gunpowder is reflected in the cognate terms *santabárbara* or *santabarbara*, which denote the powder magazine of a ship or fortress. Both saints are associated with violent deaths at the hands of their enemies. Barbara's association with fire, explosives, and gunpowder especially recurs in the fate of the citizens of Dubai who are caught in the phosphorus attack.

The painting remained in Piacenza until 1754, when it was sold by the Benedictine monks to Augustus III, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland. He

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acquired the work for his collection in Dresden, Germany, where it became a prized possession of the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister. During World War II, the painting was evacuated to protect it from air raids. After the war, it was taken by Soviet forces and transported to the Soviet Union as war booty. It was returned to Dresden in 1955 and has since been housed in the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, part of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden.

The Phosphorus Mother-and-Child both do not gaze into the eyes of the (text-internal) player of *Spec Ops: The Line*, because of the unsettling fact that (a) they are both dead, (b) the mother does not have eyes left in her sockets to see with, and (c) the mother has placed her hand over the eyes of her child protectively. *Konrad's Madonna* and the *Sistine Madonna and* their two accompanying children, however, do stare into the eyes of the (text-internal) player. When understood in their intratextual (the *Phosphorus Madonna* and *Konrad's Madonna*) and intertextual relationships (idem combined with Raphael's Madonna), it appears as if the second and third Mother-and-Child *take over* the gaze of the burned and blinded first one, both as witnesses of what happened and as accusers of those responsible, that is, Walker/the player. *Konrad's Madonna*, and through it the *Sistine Madonna*, which it is quoting, asks the question, on behalf of their Phosphorus counterpart: why have you killed us?

The Massacre of the Innocents and Rachel's Sorrow

If one understands the mother-and-child of the phosphorus scene as representing the Madonna and Child, via Konrad's painting as middle ground, the game takes on a sudden and perhaps surprising theological quality. If one asks the question that connects the three Madonnas – When were Mary and Jesus in a situation relatable to those of the phosphorus victims? – one biblical scene pops to mind immediately: the Bethlehem Infanticide, also known as the Massacre of the Innocents, as related in Matthew 2:16–18.

In Matthew Chapter 2, Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus are visited by the *magoi* from the East, who are following the star that leads them to Bethlehem. In the Christian tradition, these *magoi* have evolved into the Three Wise Men or – more commonly – the Three Kings, named Melchior, Caspar, and Balthasar. Both the number and rank of the visitors were 'deduced' from the fact that three gifts were presented to Jesus and his parents – gold, incense, and myrrh – all of which are of very high value, and thus only affordable to royalty.[4] Before finding Jesus in Bethlehem, they pay King Herod a visit and ask him where they could find the new-born 'King of the Jews?' Herod, fearing for his position of power by a possible new competitor, asks the *magoi* to return to him after they have found this new king. Herod fakes he wants to worship the little one too, but soon Matthew's reader learns his true motivations. After the *magoi* receive a dream in which God warns them not to

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return to Herod, they return to their home country via an alternative route. Dreams and dreaming are incidentally very important narrative devices in Matthew's Gospel, connecting the Joseph from Genesis to the one taking care of Jesus and Mary.[5] The whole passage from Matthew is worth quoting in full (2:12–23):

> (12) And after being warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way. (13) Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to kill Him.' (14)
>
> So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt. (15) He stayed there until the death of Herod; this happened so that what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet would be fulfilled:
>
> 'Out of Egypt, I called my son.'
>
> (16) Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent men and killed all the boys who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi. (17) Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled:
>
> (18) 'A voice was heard in Ramah
> weeping and great mourning,
> Rachel weeping for her children:
> and she refused to be comforted.'
>
> (19) But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, and said, (20) 'Get up, take the Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child's life are dead.' (22) So Joseph got up, took the Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel. (22) But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Then after being warned by God in a dream, he left for the regions of Galilee, (23) and came and settled in a city called Nazareth. This happened so that what was spoken through the prophets would be fulfilled:
>
> 'He will be called a Nazarene.'

These 'Holy Innocents' are considered to be the earliest martyrs of Christendom because they were killed by Herod to thwart Jesus Christ.[6] Of course, from a historical perspective, it is quite difficult to argue that these children died for a faith that did not exist during their untimely demise, since they could not have consciously affirmed that which did not yet exist. Nevertheless, this argument held little practical weight in the tradition.[7]

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Matthew quotes Jeremiah 31:15 in verse 18 to accompany the massacre. In Jeremiah, Rachel is weeping for the loss of her children, who have been slaughtered by the Babylonians. Matthew suggests that the mothers of Bethlehem were just as sorrowful for the loss of their children at the hands of Herod, who is thereby identified as a contemporary Babylonian – certainly not a compliment. And even when, in Jeremiah, God speaks to Rachel to relieve her grief, informing her that her children will return to Jerusalem, this optimistic tone is lost in the context of Matthew 2.

If we take this intertextual link between Matthew's story about the Holy Innocents on the one hand, and the two Madonnas encountered in *Spec Ops: The Line* on the other, Konrad's painting becomes – even more – an accusation of Walker and – through him – the text-internal player (and possibly the text-external reader). Walker-cum-the player are equated with King Herod, a figure commonly associated in Christian tradition with tyranny and pure evil.

The Phosphorus Madonna is associated with Rachel from Matthew's quotation: the mother-and-child from Dubai will *not* return – they are dead. But since their eyes are 'absent,' either through having been burnt or being shielded, they can no longer weep for themselves: Dubai's Rachel cannot weep for her child. Others must take over this duty from here on, and the game suggests two non-mutually exclusive options: Mary and Jesus on the one hand, and the text-internal reader of the game on the other.

Liberating the Downtrodden

This intra- and intertextual web of Madonnas in *Spec Ops: The Line* evokes a particular kind of theological thinking. The identification between the Mary-and-Child with the victims of war and conflict is rooted in the ideas found in liberation theology.

Liberation theology emerged in the second part of the 20th century in Latin America and spread afield later on. This specific kind of theology wanted – quite literally – to liberate the 'poor,' those who have to live a life tainted by (institutional) discrimination, (political) oppression, violence, (intergenerational) poverty, and by a lack of education and economic opportunities.[8] The movement drew heavily from the social teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, particularly as developed during the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and the Latin American Episcopal Conference in Medellín, Colombia, held in 1968.[9] These events emphasized the Church's responsibility to address the structural causes of poverty and to stand in solidarity with the marginalized.

Central to the movement's theology is the idea of the 'preferential option for the poor,' which has four intertwined dimensions.[10] (1) Liberation theology re-reads the stories of the Old and New Testament in light of the liberation of 'the people' by God, especially the Exodus narrative, the prophetic

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literature, and the teachings of Jesus Christ. This biblical liberation, according to the movement, is not (only) about being freed from sin and (divine) punishment, but (also) from concrete social, economic, and political oppression. (2) From this reading, liberation theology argues that God has a special concern for the poor, since many biblical stories tell about God coming to the aid and liberation of the downtrodden.

(3) Therefore, the church should have a special priority to aid those who are in dire need of help. Liberation theology argues that salvation encompasses both spiritual and material dimensions, advocating that the transformation of unjust social structures is an integral aspect of Christian faith. (4) Finally, liberation theology argues that one cannot understand who God truly is if not through the lens of the poor. Being poor means that one has a special kind of knowledge about God that is unattainable by the privileged. This idea echoes the spiritualities of the Franciscan and Dominican orders, as Francis and Dominic both advocated living a life of poverty in community in order to attain true spiritual freedom and enlightenment.

Liberation theology is praxis-oriented, emphasizing the interplay between theological reflection and concrete action. It adopts a methodological approach that begins with the lived experience of the poor. This involves three stages: (1) observing the socio-economic and political conditions of oppression, (2) engaging in critical reflection informed by scripture and tradition, and (3) committing to actions aimed at societal transformation. This emphasis on praxis distinguishes liberation theology from more abstract or speculative theological frameworks, aligning it closely with grassroots movements and social activism.

Prominent figures in liberation theology include the Peruvian theologian and Dominican priest Gustavo Gutiérrez (1928–2024), the Brazilian theologian and former Catholic priest Leonardo Boff (*1938), and the Spanish theologian and Jesuit Jon Sobrino (1938). Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador (1917–1980), though not a formal theologian, became a symbol of liberation theology through his advocacy for justice and through his martyrdom. He was formally declared a saint by Pope Francis in 2018. Liberation theology has faced significant criticism and challenges, particularly during the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, who condemned its perceived Marxist tendencies.[11] However, Pope Francis has a far more positive stance toward liberation theology, very probably because of his own biography, which placed him in Latin America for a considerable time of his life.[12]

Murdering God

From a liberation theological viewpoint, conjured up by the intertextuality between the three Madonnas, *Spec Ops: The Line* invokes yet another biblical theme: God's solidarity with the poor, *in casu* the murdered citizens of Dubai,

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especially those killed by the phosphorus mortar.[13] In Matthew 25:31–46, Jesus talks to his followers about the judgment of the world in the well-known metaphor on 'sheep and goats' (see Table 8.1).

Jesus talks about the 'Son of Man' who comes – with his angels – to judge all people. As a divine shepherd, he divides them into two categories: sheep on his right, goats on his left. The text discusses both groups having a dialogue with the divine shepherd; both matching one another closely (see Table 8.1).

To the sheep on his right, the Son of Man declares they are welcome to 'inherit the kingdom,' while the goats on his left are 'accursed' and sent to eternal fire. To both groups, the divine shepherd explains the reason for their fate. The sheep – apparently – have provided the Son of Man with food and drink, with shelter and clothes and visited him when he was sick and

Table 8.1 A schematic overview of Mathew 25:31–46.

But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, just as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, but the goats on the left.	
Then the King will say to those on His right,	Then He will also say to those on His left,
'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.	'Depart from Me, you accursed people, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels;
For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.'	for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.'
Then the righteous will answer Him,	Then they themselves also will answer,
'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? And when did we see You as a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?'	'Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or as a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?'
And the King will answer and say to them,	Then He will answer them,
'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of Mine, you did it for Me.'	'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it for one of the least of these, you did not do it for Me, either.'
'These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'	

On the left, the words, the Son of Man speaks to the righteous ones; on the right, the words spoken to the unrighteous ones.

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imprisoned. The goats, on the contrary, have done nothing of the sort: they neglected the Son of Man in his earthly needs. Both groups react surprised: they cannot seem to recall any situations in which they have (or have not) acted for the benefit of the shepherd. The Son of Man declares to both the sheep and the goats: what you did for the least of my brothers and sisters, you have done for me; and what you did not do for the least of my brothers and sisters, you did not do for me.

This passage equates Jesus Christ with all people in need of food ('hungry,' 'thirsty'), shelter and protection ('stranger'), nursing ('sick'), and company ('prison'), in the sense that helping those in need equals helping God himself. He who helps a needy human helps God himself. Those who refuse such help refuse God himself. The text does specify that it is not about people who need help in a general sense, but those in *dire* need, because of their social position ('the least of my brothers and sisters'), that is, those who structurally suffer the most in our world, in other words, the 'poor' who are so focused upon in liberation theology.

If this equation is true in a providing-positive sense – what one does for the poor, one does for God; what one does not do for the poor, one does not do for God – then it is also true in the protecting-negative sense – if one has wronged the poor, one has wronged God. Demeaning a person, especially one at the bottom of our society, is defaming God himself. Unjustly imprisoning someone who is poor is equally unjustly throwing God in jail. And killing 'one of the least of my brothers and sisters' is equal to killing God (in a metaphorical sense). The text of Matthew does not state this explicitly, but if one follows the logic of the text, this is the only possible outcome.

If applied to the story of *Spec Ops: The Line*, the actions *against* the 'poor ones' of said game are pointedly disqualified as being crimes against God. The actions of the 33rd Battalion, the insurgents, the CIA, and Delta Force that are harming – intentionally or not – the civilians of Dubai are – from a Christian theological point of view – also harming God. This is especially true for Walker and the player, especially in the phosphorus attack (it is of significance that the *Phosphorus Madonna* appears in that scene). Walker's actions kill the poor, who are the least of the Son of Man's brothers and sisters, and therefore he 'murders' God. And because of the entanglement of the player with its avatar, the text-internal player is *also* killing God.

Because of the intertextuality between the three Madonnas, the player – through its actions – not only murders Mary, the Mother of God, and her Son, the Son of Man and Divine Shepherd from Matthew's story, but also God himself. It is one of the most powerful accusations the game brings toward the player: by playing this game, the text-internal author communicates, the player kills God. The text-internal player has no other choice than to do that, even though the text-internal author strongly suggests otherwise, increasing the pressure on the text-external player, who is the only one with any kind of choice left: to quit the game.

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Stop the game or kill God. From a liberation theological point of view, this is the question the game ultimately asks its players.

Notes

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12 Ole Jakob Løland, *The Political Theology of Pope Francis. Understanding the Latin American Pope*, London: Routledge (2023), 39–68.
13 Cinthia Pinto, *Encountering Christ in the Suffering Humanity (Mt. 25:31–46)*, Vienna: LIT Verlag (2009), 41–82.

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Conclusion

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Spec Ops: The Line is an anti-war shooter disguised as a war simulator, problematizing in-game morality by presenting an intentionally faulty one. Based on Francis Coppola's 1979 film *Apocalypse Now* and Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899), it shows the dark side of war and conflict, epitomized in the moral and emotional down-spiraling of its protagonist Walker. It conjures up an intentional ludo-narrative dissonance to exert stress on the entanglement between the player's in-game avatar (Walker) and the text-internal player, *and* it jeopardizes the identification between the text-internal player and the text-external player. During this process, the game presents itself as fully self-aware, taunting the (text-internal) player to hate its own involvement in the game's violence, while at the same time preventing that player from breaking free of that self-inflicted violence. It is as anti-war a game as can get.

In the Introduction, I postulated that *Spec Ops: The Line* is a game that encourages its players to engage in intellectual, moral, and religious conversion. This makes the game a catalyst for such a conversion within its players, both on the level of the text-internal player and that of the text-external player, arguing that the greater freedom of the latter makes it possible to end the cycle of digital violence by stopping playing the game itself. In the Conclusion, I wish to argue in support of my earlier postulate. First, I will summarize Lonergan's concept of conversion and then that is communicated from the perspective of the Communication-Oriented Method of Text Analysis.

According to Lonergan (see Chapter 2), there are three different types of conversion: intellectual, moral, and religious, all interrelated, but not identical to one another. To summarize in my own words, intellectual conversion results from and leads to perceiving and thus understanding the world in a different and more profound way. Moral conversion, likewise, results from and leads to judging and valuing the world according to a different set of codes, thus deepening one's ability to act in the world according to this new set. Religious conversion, finally, results from and leads to a total overhaul

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of one's perception of one's own existence; one's being-in-the-world has changed dramatically and often irrevocably.

According to the Communication-Oriented Method of Text Analysis (COMTA in Scheme), all texts have three different communication levels (see Chapter 1): between the characters in the textual world, between the text-internal author and the text-internal reader, and, finally, between the text-external author(s) and the text-external reader(s). Even though this is true for all texts, video games as a medium feature a unique capacity setting them apart from other kinds of texts. Because of the necessary interactive nature of the medium, there is an entanglement between the player's in-game avatar and the text-internal player. Of course, like all texts, the identification between the text-internal reader/player and the text-external reader/player can be stronger, weaker, or even nonexistent.

If we combine Lonergan and the COMTA, we can distinguish three different moments of three different kinds of conversions (see Table 9.1). The question is, does *Spec Ops: The Line* deliver on all nine of them or not?

On the level of the characters, specifically Walker, intellectual conversion takes place. Walker sees and understands the world he lives in in a radically different way than at the beginning of the game. When entering Dubai, Walker venerates Colonel Konrad and is convinced that he and his team are on the right side of the moral spectrum. After all, they have come on a reconnaissance mission, ultimately to find out the fate of Konrad's battalion and that of the Dubai population, very probably in order to plan and execute a bigger rescue and evacuation project. At the end of the game, Walker perceives Dubai for what it truly is: a war zone, where cruelty and death are all too common.

Walker's moral conversion is a bit more complex than that. Due to his experiences in Dubai, Walker slowly descends into his own personal, psychological, and emotional hell. He is disillusioned by Konrad and the CIA; he has lost his two comrades under terrible circumstances, and he is responsible for the killing of both fellow American soldiers and innocent citizens of Dubai. One would say that taken together these are more than enough reasons for a moral reorientation. But instead, Walker stays on his own 'track': to find

Table 9.1 An overview of Lonergan's three types of conversions on the different communicative levels of the COMTA.

Type of conversion (Lonergan)	*Level of communication (COMTA)*		
	Level of the character	*Level of the text-internal player*	*Level of the text-external player*
Intellectual	Yes	Yes	Yes(?)
Moral	No	Yes	Yes(?)
Religious	No	No	Yes(?)

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Konrad and hold him responsible for all the violence, even though much of that violence is caused by Walker at this point in the game's story.

A religious conversion is even more complex than the moral one. Walker will leave Dubai as a changed man, that is, if the text-internal player allows him to do so (by choosing the appropriate path at the game's ending). And even then, the game painstakingly points out that Walker will never be able to leave Dubai: he is so emotionally and psychologically scarred by everything he experienced that mentally he will remain in the 'Dubai state' forever. The tragedy of Walker's fate is that he cannot exist differently in his world: he is doomed to stay the same forever: to relive all the 'choices' he made and the actions he took during the Dubai mission, as his own personal hell.

On the level of the text-internal player, intellectual conversion, moral conversion, and religious conversion do occur, predominantly because – out of necessity – the text-internal player cannot do otherwise than understand and accept the text-internal author's communication perfectly. If the text-internal author of *Spec Ops: The Line* wants to convey anti-war sentiments, the text-internal player cannot do otherwise than to share in these sentiments. If the text-internal author of the game wants to encourage conversion in the player, it has to abide by this. The text-internal player learns during the gameplay, and because of this, to understand the world differently (intellectual conversion) and to judge it differently, that is, to understand the dark side of violent conflict (moral conversion).

There is however, no possibility of religious conversion for the text-internal player, since this would require that it stop playing the game, a luxury only available for the text-external player. To exist differently in the world of *Spec Ops: The Line*, one would have to stop living in it altogether, dismissing its premise of endless and unavoidable cycles of violence, with only a false suggestion of freedom, choice, and true responsibility. The text-external player, however, can make this choice, answering the ultimate message of *Spec Ops: The Line*: stop the violence, stop playing the game.

On the other hand, the text-external player, exactly because he or she is external to the game-as-text, can or cannot adopt intellectual, moral, or religious conversion based on his or her individual experience with the game. Nevertheless, the game primes its players, both text-internal and external, for these three types of conversion, even though the text-internal and text-external player do not have the same possibility to engage in that conversion.

Spec Ops: The Line may not fall into the traditional category of serious games; however, its focus on ethical gameplay and morality makes the game an interesting and appealing 'moral laboratory' for text-external players to contemplate and practice their moral decision-making. Especially because of the game's pseudo-choices, players can evaluate the possibilities and impossibilities of moral reasoning and responsibility in a rapidly increasing complex world where individual choices are less easily apparently available rather than more apparently available.

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The anti-war message of *Spec Ops: The Line* is strengthened even more by its implicit reference to Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*, which is connected to the victims of Walker's phosphorus attack through the compilation that depicts Konrad's office some minutes before the ending of the game. The game connects the suffering of the citizens of Dubai – innocent and not responsible in any degree for the war taking place – to the suffering of Mary Mother of God and her son Jesus, especially within the story of the Massacre of the Innocents. Walker *and* the player are given the role of the evil King Herod, an identity that can only be countered and rejected by a text-external player by ending the game.

The game's text-internal author claims that by killing the innocent ones, the player is killing God. The text-internal player has no other choice than to do precisely that, while the text-external player can walk away, ending the cycle of violence, the descent into madness, and the absolute absence of true moral responsibility. Quite a claim for a game: he or she who wants to win the game has to stop playing.

Blurring the Lines

In the end, *Spec Ops: The Line*'s meaning lies in its title, or rather subtitle, 'the line.' The game blurs and crosses several 'lines.' The game crosses the line of its own genre: it presents itself as a war simulator and first-person military shooter, but crosses its apparent genre by turning itself into a game that criticizes violent conflict, pointing out the player's involvement and thus responsibility in the initiation and continuation of that violence. Again: if one wants to win the game, one has to stop playing. And only a text-external player has that capacity.

Next, like for the problematic heroes of the novel *Heart of Darkness* and the film *Apocalypse Now*, the game blurs the line between reality and insanity for both Walker and the text-internal (and arguably the text-external) player. The game pushes Walker/the player into a downward spiral from which neither Walker nor the text-internal player can escape: it is only the text-external player who can do so. Again, the only true escape is to stop playing the game.

The game also blurs the line between free choice and a kind of in-game predestination: Walker and the text-internal player are offered what seems to be free choices, but in reality, those choices do not matter in any shape or form. Video games as a genre live and thrive by their suggestion of player freedom, even if some games provide more than others. But in the end, the player can only choose from a matrix of possibilities and varieties provided by the (text-internal) author of the game. In-game freedom for the text-internal player is limited to choosing from a set of options. There are more options available for the text-external player: he or she can manipulate the game from

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the outside to widen the range of possibilities, *and* he or she can choose to stop playing.

And finally, the game blurs the line between morality and immorality, illustrating the fleeting nature of clear-cut dualistic morality under the insane circumstances that war produces. What is morally justified in the context of armed conflict – whether that is an 'official' war or a grassroots insurgence – seems clear from the comfortable position of an outside spectator. When one is an active participant in armed conflict – whether as a combatant or as a civilian – morality becomes hazy, and comes into conflict with the urge for self-preservation, with the protection of those who feel close emotionally or strategically, and with the dark emotions stirred up by the sight and taste of human blood and severed body parts.